

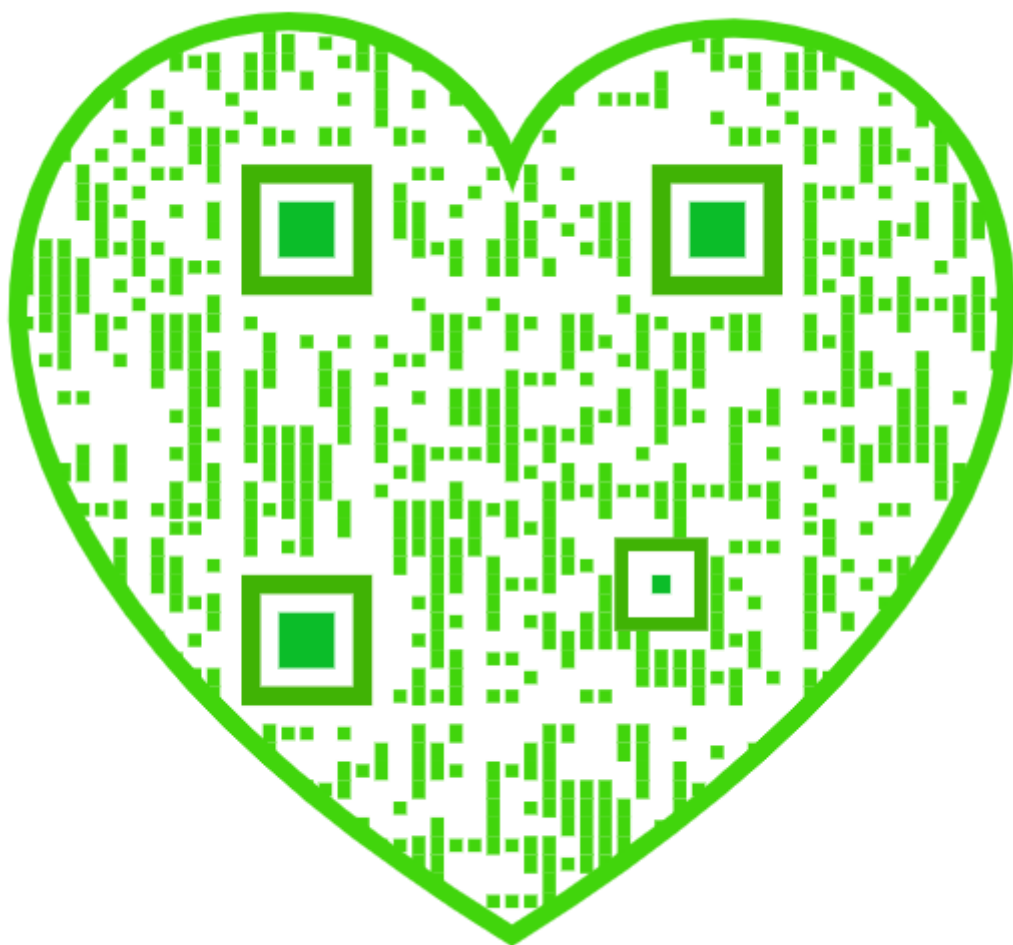
NOVELIZATION
Kotoko Hachijo

ORIGINAL STORY & ART
Shou Harusono

Is it
OKAY IF
WE STICK
TOGETHER?

Hirano and Kagiyura



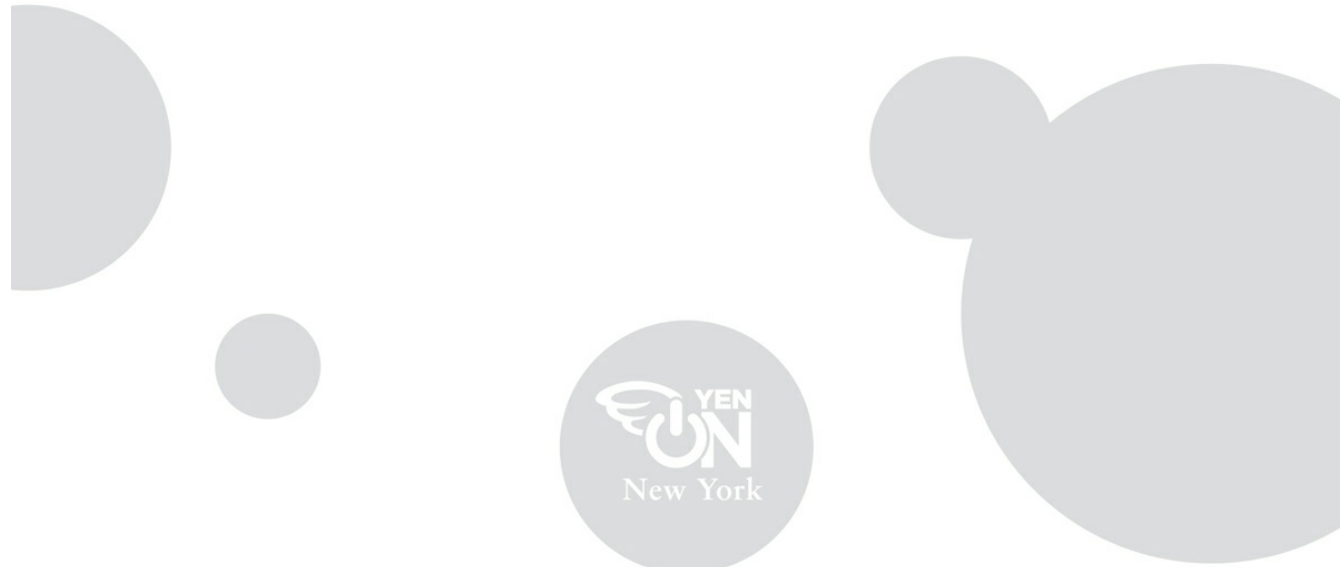




Hirano and Kagiura

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Kotoko Hachijo

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Hirano and Kagiura

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Translation by Kevin Steinbach

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The Japanese edition of this novel includes bonus manga. That content is at the back of the book, so don't forget to flip all the way to the end and read right to left!

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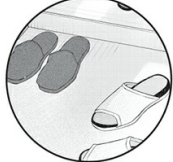
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TIME TOGETHER.



CHAPTER 1

FOR THE FIRST TIME.



On a train you don't normally take, even the way the car sways back and forth feels surprising and new.

Out of all his middle school classmates, only Akira Kagiura had decided to stay at a dormitory in high school, despite going to school in his prefecture.

Why? Well, getting to and from school would have taken two hours each way, and since Kagiura absolutely had to be at basketball practice early each morning, he didn't really have much of a choice.

Students were allowed to be in the dorms starting on the second of April—shortly before the entrance ceremony—and Kagiura had applied to move in immediately, on the very first day. He got along well with his family and was happy at home, but he was eager to get a look at his new surroundings as soon as he could. His bulkier possessions were being delivered to the dorm, so the only luggage he carried was a single shoulder bag. He was traveling light.

Kagiura hadn't been on this train alone since he'd come to take the school's entrance exam. His parents had been with him when they'd gone to do the registration paperwork, and he'd been too busy talking to them to appreciate what was around him.

On that late afternoon as the train rumbled along, there were several empty seats, but Kagiura stood by the door, watching the ever-changing scenery speed by. He relaxed as he realized there was more greenery in the city than he'd expected. He felt excitement building, though not quite the same kind of excitement he felt when his team was going off on a training retreat together or to some distant locale for an away game.

A gaggle of high school students wearing tracksuits emblazoned with their schools' names boarded the train, maybe on their way back from practice.

Kagiura sneaked surreptitious glances at them. *Wonder if any of them are from my school*, he thought. But while he was still reading the letters on their shirts, the train arrived at his destination.

Kagiura's dorm was about a fifteen-minute walk from school, far enough that the closest station to the dorm wasn't the closest station to school. There were two types of rooms: two-person and four-person. Kagiura would be staying in the former, with just one roommate.

When he met the dorm leader, Hanzawa, Kagiura immediately got the impression that he was the sort of guy who never stopped smiling. Even as they exchanged polite greetings, Hanzawa seemed to be grinning nonstop. His small talk as he gave Kagiura a tour of the facilities, including the cafeteria and the baths, was often peppered with laughter.

"Oh, right," Hanzawa said. "Here in the dorms, we don't get too formal, so you can just call me Hanzawa."

"Hanzawa. All right."

"Then again, most people call me Dorm Leader anyway!"

"Huh?"

Hanzawa gave an enigmatic chuckle, and while Kagiura was still trying to decide the best way to address him, he continued: "Like I said, unless we're talking to our friends, it's pretty much respectful but not formal here, up to and including with the administrative staff. It's not what you would call a hard-and-fast rule, but that's how adults treat one another out in the working world, so it's good practice. Gets you into the habit."

"Huh... So you don't worry about who's an upperclassman and who's an underclassman at all?"

"Not among dormmates, for the most part."

"Wow..."

"You'll get all the details at orientation. Oh yeah, your roommate is named Taiga Hirano. He's a second-year, like me. You probably saw in the pamphlet, but first-years and second-years are always paired up. I guess you could call it a

buddy system. If you're confused about anything, start by asking your buddy."

"Right. And this Hirano..."

Kagiura was just about to ask what kind of person his new roommate was, but he didn't get the chance. The staff member at the dorm's reception desk called, "Hanzawa? Telephone!"

"I'm coming!" Hanzawa said. Then he turned to Kagiura. "Sorry, Kagiura, but do you think you can make it to your room on your own? The doors are all numbered, so I don't think you should have any trouble." He was practically turning to walk away even as he spoke.

Kagiura nodded quickly. "Sure, no problem. Thank you very much!"

The dorm leader was already hurrying away. *He's a busy guy, huh?* Kagiura thought with something like admiration. He turned and headed up the stairs. His room number was on the paperwork he'd been given, so he didn't expect to have a problem finding it.

I wonder what this second-year, Hirano, is like. I hope he's nice. Kagiura suddenly felt a pang of something like homesickness. Until the week before, he'd been wearing a middle school uniform, and here he was about to meet a perfect stranger who was going to be his roommate.

He wondered if Hirano was in any clubs or played on any teams. If he was on the basketball team, Kagiura had a mountain of questions for him. And even if he didn't play for the team, maybe he had friends who did. If nothing else, the fact that he lived in the dorms meant he was away from home, too. Where was he from?

With all these thoughts running through his head, the time flew by, and before he knew it, Kagiura had found his room. He knocked gently, and the door promptly opened.

"Oh..." Before Kagiura could say hello, he found himself up close and personal with the glare of the person who had opened the door. "Hngh?" He found himself wincing under a gaze both sharp and suspicious.

Is this guy some kind of delinquent? The blond dye job, the cold look in his eyes... And are his ears pierced?

“Uh, I g-guess we’re going to be roommates,” Kagiura started. “I’m—”

“Oh, so you’re Kagiura. Sorry, I overslept. Isn’t the dorm leader with you?”

Now that he mentioned it, Kagiura realized that the other young man’s voice had that huskiness of someone just shaking off sleep.

“He got called away by a staff member. He told me to look for my room...”

“Huh. Well, sorry again. C’mon in. You can leave your other slippers there. Swap ’em for room slippers.” Hirano bent down, still sort of mumbling to himself, and slid his own slippers into a corner so that Kagiura could easily change his. The way he did it was so thoughtful and polite—nothing like Kagiura’s rough-and-tumble first impression of him.

I guess he’s not so scary after all, Kagiura thought. *Heck, he’s downright kind...* He felt warmth spread through his chest, touching the part of him that was, admittedly, lonely.

“Thank you very much, Hirano. Hey, I... I look forward to living with you this year.”

“Yeah, you too, Kagiura.”

Kagiura unpacked his things—which had arrived at the dorm just before he had—but as he hadn’t received his textbooks yet, his desk remained barren. His uniform, which hung in a spot set aside for their clothes, was a little on the large side in the expectation that he’d grow into it.

He touched the sheets, which were worn from being washed so many times. The texture was wonderful and promised to be very pleasant when he climbed into bed for the night. He looked around, knowing this was where he would be living for the foreseeable future. While his house might not have been close enough for him to get to practice every morning, he was from this prefecture. He could go home on the weekends if he wanted to. But even so...

“You all right, Kagiura?”

“Huh? Why do you ask?”

“Aw, nothing. Just thought you might be tired or something.”

“Nah... I mean, no. I’m fine.”

Hirano grunted in acknowledgment and went quiet again. Kagiura got to his feet and peeked over into Hirano's space to find him at his desk, absorbed in work. His golden hair might give him a tough-guy look, but he seemed to be quite a serious student. There was already no trace of sleepiness left on his face.

Maybe he's in the advanced classes. He'd heard that most of the students who lived in this dorm were on the academic fast track. Kagiura had taken Hirano for something of a punk at first glance, but seeing him hard at work, he realized his roommate might actually be very dedicated to his studies. It made his handsome features stand out all the more and somehow made him seem less approachable.

He didn't want to disturb his new roommate with questions about where to find food, so instead he sat down at his own desk and opened the pamphlet on dorm life. Thoughts of filling his stomach wouldn't leave him alone. He needed food to make up for all the calories he burned when he worked out, but his monthly allowance only went so far, and students living in the dorm weren't allowed to have part-time jobs. They were supposed to focus on their studies or their club activities.

Wonder if I can get seconds at mealtimes, Kagiura thought, and after a few minutes of such pondering, he was soon dozing off.

The hand patting his shoulder was gentle, tapping him in a pleasant, comforting rhythm. A voice called his name in a way that seemed calculated to lull him deeper into sleep, and when he confirmed it wasn't a teacher, Kagiura felt a sense of relief. He was a growing boy, and his body demanded rest; he would catch a few winks any time there was the slightest chance. Sleeping in class was a regular occurrence for him, to the point that his middle school teachers had been at their wits' end.

"Hey, come on. I'm gonna leave you here."

It was only when the tapping moved to his face that it was no longer comforting. He shook his head. *Not there! I'll wake up!* It was annoying, but it certainly did render him conscious.

He was right. It wasn't a teacher...

“Kagiura, wake up already!”

Almost before the words had registered, Kagiura was sitting bolt upright, provoking a “Whoa!” from right next to his ear. Who should have woken Kagiura from his deskbound slumber but his roommate, one year ahead of him in school, Hirano. His golden hair seemed to glitter in Kagiura’s bleary eyes. It was lovely.

Kagiura nearly found himself whispering the question: *Did you make it that color because it looks so good on you?* Sadly, his tongue was heavy with sleep and wouldn’t form the words.

Kagiura blinked furiously. Hirano appeared to take it in stride. He was wearing a parka over a T-shirt.

“It’s almost time for lunch,” he said. “You coming?”

“I sure am!”

The first meal he had at the dorm cafeteria was heavenly. He could happily eat this stuff every single day.

Having lunch together, seated across from each other at the cafeteria table, created an opportunity for the two roommates to get to know each other a little better. Kagiura explained that he had entered the school on an athletic recommendation and that he was left-handed. Hirano listened attentively the entire time. Evidently, he wasn’t the type to smile and nod to keep a conversation going, but you didn’t have to be in order to be welcoming.

In the middle of the conversation, though, Kagiura’s hand stopped suddenly and wouldn’t move. Yes, the food was delicious, but there was a problem...



“You keep doing that. Wait... You don’t like green peppers, do you?” Hirano said.

Kagiura felt his shoulders twitch. He tried to make his chopsticks move, but they stayed resolutely frozen. After a very long pause, he said, “No,” and hung his head.

Hirano didn’t look dismissive or judgmental; instead, he looked like he had an idea. “I want you to conquer that fear by the time you graduate. I’ll take that.” Then he reached out with his chopsticks and whisked the pepper away. Kagiura thought he could see a halo around Hirano’s head. Who knew that being just a year older could make a person so much better at responding to the needs of others?

“Thank you...,” Kagiura said.

Hirano chewed thoroughly and then said only, “Mm, that’s good.” The fact that Kagiura had been sure Hirano was going to berate him for being picky made his decency even more impressive.

I think I could like a guy like this...

Kagiura was starting to find himself charmed by the way Hirano’s rough tone belied his kind personality. Something told him this was going to be a very fun year.



Once Hirano had put away the dorm's shared vacuum cleaner and come back to the room, he realized that cleaning the floor only made it more obvious how dirty the desks and shelves were. He could try a feather duster, but it wouldn't do much against pencil marks. Where could he find something to wipe with?

"Kagiura, you got a rag over there?" Hirano asked, and the underclassman obligingly poked his head out.

"Sure. It's pretty dirty, though. Let me clean it first. Hang on."

He must've been polishing hard over there, because the rag he held up was practically black with dirt. It had been brand-new a few minutes ago!

"Don't worry about it. It's just a quick wipe," Hirano said.

"I do worry about it!" Kagiura said, going to wash the rag. Hirano couldn't help but admire how meticulous he was.

Almost before they knew it, they had been roommates for a month. For Hirano, it was his second year living in the dormitory. For Kagiura, who was fresh out of middle school, everything was new, but nothing seemed too difficult for him, and the days passed easily.

Many of the dorm's students went home during Golden Week, near the start of summer, and Hirano and Kagiura were no exceptions. When they got back on the last day of break, they spent their time cleaning the room together. That was when it occurred to Hirano that although they'd tried to keep things fairly clean, he hadn't given the room a thorough scrub down since the start of the school year, back in April.

Hirano had been allowed to stay in the same room he'd occupied in his first year, but with someone new moving in, he'd naturally wanted to make sure the place was extra clean. When the school alerted him that Kagiura would be moving in on the second of April, the day after Hirano got back to the dorm, he had become even more determined to prepare.

There was just one thing he was worried about. Hirano was not the best communicator. He was fine once you got used to him, but it took a while for him to open up to new people, and he realized his appearance and behavior

could scare people off. He brought it up with Hanzawa, who knew how he was, and asked for advice on how to get along with this new underclassman.

Hanzawa acknowledged that calling the new guy by a nickname might be more than Hirano could manage, and they agreed “Kagiura” was probably enough. That was well and good, but it still didn’t relieve Hirano’s nerves. Besides, “Kagiura” was sort of hard to say. *Why couldn’t my roommate’s name be easier to say?* Hirano wondered. Yet he still hesitated to call Kagiura something shorter.

By tradition, the single-occupancy rooms for the seniors were typically vacated by the middle of March, so the young man who’d been living with Hirano the previous year, and who was a year ahead of him in school, had already moved on to fashion himself a temple of study in his new room.

So it was that Hirano got to spend a good while in what amounted to his own private room, and he was able to get completely ready when it came time once more to live with someone else. The result was that he had slept poorly—and the result of *that* was oversleeping right until Kagiura appeared at the door.

Forget waking early—Hirano had never been a morning person, period. Still, he’d always been able to get out of bed on time when he had a promise to keep or an appointment, so he was appalled that the one time he failed to wake up was when his new roommate was coming.

Way to make a good impression on the new guy, huh? So much for all the advice.

Still, the “new guy,” Kagiura, was easy to read, and it was clear he thought the world of Hirano and took to him quickly. He didn’t seem like much of an early riser, yet he diligently went to morning practice each day; and although he had to be dealing with more rules than he’d ever had to juggle in his life, he never complained.

The other second-years on the basketball team said Kagiura was someone they’d had their eye on while he was still in middle school and that he worked twice as hard as anyone else.

He was also, it seemed, not great at studying. Just the other day, he’d spotted Hirano somewhere on campus with another upperclassman, Sasaki, and when

Hirano got home, Kagiura had asked him, “Who was that you were with?”

“Ahhh, he’s having a tough time in class, so I was showing him my notes,” Hirano replied.

Kagiura looked taken aback and said, “Well, I’m having a tough time, too.” His expression was so anxious that Hirano started to feel like he was catching his roommate’s nerves.

“You getting the notes down all right?” he asked. High school teachers tended to erase what they’d written on the blackboard awfully fast—too fast if you were trying to keep up with a subject you struggled with. Understandably, Kagiura was having some issues.

He didn’t quite look at Hirano as he said, “I get my friend to show me his notes when I have trouble keeping up.” Hirano hadn’t felt like he was scolding Kagiura, but apparently in trying to get a complete picture of the situation, he’d started to sound like he was lecturing.

“That’s cool. Well, keep at it. Just try not to fall asleep in class, huh?”

He’d meant that last remark as a joke, but Kagiura nodded earnestly. Hirano felt like it was one of the oddest reactions he’d ever seen.

High school wasn’t part of the compulsory educational system. At this point, exam results determined your academic ranking. If Kagiura was feeling confident, then fine—but the first real hurdle would be the midterm exams in the middle of May. With the sports festival right at the end of the month, Kagiura’s schedule would be relentless, and the scope of the midterms was so specific that in your first year, it was hard to set yourself apart with your grades.

Or at least, it should have been.

There was a reason Hirano felt he couldn’t ignore Kagiura’s strange reaction. There was someone quite close to him who slept in class and sometimes even played hooky. Shuumei Sasaki was his name, and he was a regular offender when it came to coming to class late. In fact, he’d missed the beginning of class again today.

They’d spent all last year as classmates, and Hirano knew from experience that Sasaki rarely managed to take down all the notes. Hirano had lent Sasaki

his notes more than once after Sasaki had begged him for help, but the next week there would be homework, and Sasaki's would be full of mistakes. It was enough to make Hirano wonder what Sasaki was copying when he borrowed those notes. And wouldn't you know it—they were classmates again this year.

Sasaki dyed his hair a flashy brown color and had covered himself in piercings (not that Hirano was one to talk). No matter how you put it, he was a man who stood out. He was handsome, but he had a nasty look in his eyes—he acted like everything was too much trouble, and during special events, he didn't even try to hide how disinterested he was, often staring off into space.

As classmates went, it was hard to get close to him. When a guy so tall acted so cold, people found it intimidating—but at the same time, he wasn't quite as bad an apple as he looked. In spite of the tough-guy attitude, Hirano had heard him remark, "I don't like to fight. I'm no good at it."

If he had to guess, Hirano would have said Sasaki found high school boring. It wasn't exactly that the guy had no interests—Hirano sometimes saw him talking animatedly with his friends about music, but that was about it.

When Hirano got to school, he was, as usual, accosted by Sasaki, who had, as usual, missed first period. "Hirano, show me your notes from English class," he said. Normally, Hirano would have just handed them over, but he'd been thinking, and today he decided to bargain.

"All right, but you have to show me your math notes," he said.

Hirano never needed to copy anyone's notes if he hadn't actually been absent from a class, so he wasn't sure how Kagiura would cope—but he did know that Sasaki, who virtually never took notes, was good at math. Well, good in comparison to his other subjects, but in any case, he seemed to know how to go about learning arithmetic. Maybe Hirano could pick up some pointers for when he helped Kagiura.

"Huh? Yeah, sure, I guess. But why? You gonna copy my answers to the homework?"

"In your dreams, moron. My roommate's trying to figure this stuff out. Thought maybe I could learn something about how to teach him."

Math was third period. For all his academic troubles, Sasaki never left his books behind; he always had the textbook and the notes for his upcoming classes. The guy never forgot his things.

Hirano opened the notes Sasaki held out to him and sighed. It was more or less what he'd expected—a bunch of context-free scribbles. How did Sasaki even use his own notes? He hadn't copied what the teacher had written so much as he'd scrawled down a formula in large print, beside which there was some number that he'd circled. It felt a bit like an abridged version of what must have been on the blackboard, but Hirano couldn't tell what the number represented. The rest of the notes seemed to be furiously worked problems. There wasn't a single line of explanation or any examples. What even was this?

"What's this circled number?" Hirano asked.

"Oh, that. That's the textbook page number."

"Oh... Great."

"The explanation and the examples are all in the book. Why would I bother copying them when I can just look there?"

Hirano had to admit there was a certain logic to the way Sasaki had chosen to be lazy. He thought back on Kagiura's notebook but realized that other than trouble taking notes and challenges with study generally, he and Sasaki had almost nothing in common. The moment Kagiura got to something he didn't understand, his hand stopped moving, so there were these big blank spaces in his notebook, but Sasaki simply didn't write down the things he *did* understand.

While Hirano stood there pondering, Sasaki gave him a perplexed look. "You seem really, like, serious about this."

"No more than usual." How could he just ignore an underclassman suffering right in the same room? At least Kagiura wasn't acting as if he felt beaten by his difficulties. He was struggling with material that was suddenly much harder than he was used to, but with his earnestness and dedication, there was still every chance he could turn things around.

"Wish you'd take *my* study problems that seriously."

"All last year, you never seemed like you wanted to get any better."

“Ha-ha. Fair enough, Hirano—but it doesn’t matter how serious you are. If your precious little underclassman sucks at studying, then he’s not gonna get any better.”

“Kagiura’s not like that,” Hirano snapped. Kagiura was serious and dedicated. Hirano thrust the notebook back at Sasaki. Sasaki’s mouth was hanging open slightly, as if he was stunned by Hirano’s reaction, but Hirano didn’t know why he would be.



It was after practice, the first day club activities had resumed after midterms, and the joy of having the tests over and done with had made Akira Kagiura really energetic. He'd been down in the dumps. He worked and worked, and for every time things went well, there was another moment that tormented him with some kind of problem.

Kagiura was still just in his teens, but he had dedicated no small part of his life thus far to basketball. More often than not, his failure to grow taller and faster had bothered him. He'd had something of a complex about his height, which was no taller than average for his age, and he'd been known to heave a sigh when he saw the price of shoes that fit his feet. He'd changed teams because he hadn't been satisfied with the quality of the coaching, and he was devastated whenever he felt he hadn't done well enough in a game.

Nonetheless, he'd already been scouted by several schools during his middle school days, and he had to admit that he'd never imagined he would have a new team member who *hadn't* arrived on an athletic recommendation get ranked just as highly as him. It hurt. It burned, and he couldn't stand it.

It felt like he'd been slapped by a humiliation designed to cure his arrogance, and the blood had rushed to his head. During the second half of practice that day, it had been all he could do to keep up with the guy. He was a first-year, too, yet he was over 180 cm—a good ten centimeters taller than Kagiura. True, Kagiura was still having his growth spurt, but at the moment, he was losing to this guy.

He knew that the body you were born with wasn't the same as your talent; the world wasn't that simple. But even Kagiura could tell—could feel—that this guy, who'd been a sprinter on the track-and-field team in middle school, would become an expert basketball player as he practiced. He was—to Kagiura's chagrin—just getting started. What a new player really lacked was experience. As he learned team play and strategy, he would become a great teammate; there was no doubt. But...

"You're both exemplary first-years." That's what the team seniors had said. That was their evaluation.

“This sucks...”

It was hardly unusual for perfectly capable athletes to get into school via the general entrance exams. But that didn't change how much Kagiura had wanted to be the standout player in his year.

Kagiura stopped for some ramen near the train station to chase the gloom away before heading to the dorm, and when he got back, dinner was nearly over. Normally, he changed his clothes before he went to the cafeteria so that everything stayed clean, but today, there he was still in his basketball uniform.

He took a quick look around but didn't see Hirano anywhere. *Guess he's already eaten*, he thought ruefully. A little too scared to just ask his roommate to join him, he took a tray and found an empty seat.

With all the working out he'd done, Kagiura should have been able to eat about as much as he wanted, but the chopsticks felt heavy in his hand. He'd ordered a normal-size bowl of rice, but even that felt like a lot, and as he worked his way ever so slowly through it, all the students around him finished their meals and left one by one. Kagiura didn't exactly have time to hang around, since he could only use the bath during the time allotted to first-years.

Test results still hadn't come out, and surprisingly, he had no homework, so this should have been a day to kick back and relax, but instead he found himself finishing his food just before closing time, hastening back to his room before they kicked him out of the cafeteria.

He felt lighter as he came through the door, calling out a greeting. His room felt like his place, his home, in a way that the dorm as a whole didn't. It was almost tangible, something in the air like a relaxed, gentle feeling that seemed to be a part of the space.

“What's the matter, Kagiura? You seem kind of out of it. Feeling sick?” Hirano asked from his desk, where he was studying. Kagiura had come into the room and was just standing there, without even setting down his bag.

“Huh? Aw, nothin'. I mean... It's nothing.”

Maybe I look a bit cagey, he realized, and quickly set the bag down, then put his uniform blazer on its hanger. It was bad enough to be walking around

sulking, but to have Hirano, who had nothing to do with the basketball team, worrying about him—that was too much.

“Upset stomach?” Hirano asked.

“Kind of feels that way.” Kagiura’s stomach had felt heavy and queasy, yet he’d eaten more than he really wanted and was now suffering the consequences. He supposed that counted as an upset stomach. He had a bad feeling indigestion was in his future.

“Geez, Kagiura, you look like death. Doesn’t seem like you’ve caught a cold... What happened?”

Their eyes met.

Kagiura glanced at the clock. Ten more minutes until the first-years could use the bath. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s embarrassing.”

Just one more push, and he felt like Hirano would get it all out of him, but from sheer stubbornness, he resisted. He was a bit too young to be completely independent, but he did try his best to be self-reliant. He was living in a dorm, after all. He begrudged the idea of telling Hirano, who wasn’t even an athlete, that his pride had left him annoyed and depressed that his teammates hadn’t fed his ego.

Kagiura had come to this school thinking he could carry the basketball team, and that dream still burned in his heart. To whine about it now would be to let that dream die without even fighting for it, and he didn’t want that.

Hirano wouldn’t leave him alone, though. “You can be embarrassed here. I won’t tell anyone.”

Guess I can’t insist on having it my way, Kagiura thought. If this person was going to reach out a hand to him, he couldn’t just stay silent. Once he gave in, his only concern was the time. Hoping to get the conversation over with before he missed his chance to bathe, he reluctantly started to talk.

“There’s this other first-year on the basketball team. He’s more than 180 cm tall, and he just started playing ball this year, but he used to be on the track team, so he can really run, and he’s getting better and better at handling the ball.” He didn’t feel like singing the guy’s praises, but somehow good things

were all he could think of to say.

“Yeah?”

“And during practice today, the team captain told me and him that we were the top two from our year on the team, and I mean... I came here on a basketball *recommendation*, and I’m being told I’m no better than some guy who took the general exam, and it just stung. We’re not close enough for me to know him that well, but I can tell from our practice sessions how good he’s getting, and I know guys who throw themselves into it are only going to get better, so I figure we’ll probably be playing games together next year. It’s great to have someone like that for a teammate, but at the same time, it sucks, too. It sucks that I can’t seem to set myself apart. I wanna be a player no one can match, but this guy’s got me on height alone!”

Kagiura was quite long-limbed himself, but when faced with an opponent ten centimeters taller than he was who also knew how to move, he was at a distinct disadvantage. That’s just how basketball was. This new guy hadn’t been chosen to be part of the scrimmage games yet, but it was obvious that when he learned tactics, he had plenty of room to grow and would show them all what he could do.

The team figured Kagiura had come to them in good enough shape to play immediately, and he would be on the bench as a backup in next month’s games, but at the same time, the team had a pretty deep roster and he didn’t think he would actually get a turn on the court. If he had to stay on the bench, the gap would only grow.

Build was a *part* of your talent, and it wasn’t easy to find an environment where excellent teammates could put you through your paces. When it came to Kagiura, who stood out even against more experienced players, this new guy had no end of praise for him. But today, that had rubbed Kagiura the wrong way. It was like the guy was saying, *I’ll catch up to you real soon*.

If I was still on my middle school team, I’d probably be thrilled about him, Kagiura thought. They would have won even more tournaments together.

“I can’t help but wonder why he was on the track team... If he was so interested in basketball that he decided to start in high school just because his

track times weren't getting any better, why wouldn't he have started in middle school, you know? I'd never take it out on him, but... Well, the frustration made me stress-eat a bit, and now my stomach's paying the price." Kagiura felt like a kid complaining about this stuff, and he was fully prepared for Hirano to laugh him out of the room.

Instead, Hirano sighed softly, making a sympathetic sound. "That's rough, man. I can see why you'd be upset about him," he said. "But there's another difference between you two, Kagiura—how much effort you've put in over the years. That's not a gap he's gonna close in a few days. I'll bet you've got a lot more experience in actual games than he does, too. As for your height... Hell, you're still growing. Don't sweat it."

"Yeah... Maybe..." Kagiura found that just having someone listen to his troubles had helped calm the storm within. Now he felt silly for having bothered Hirano with it.

"It's true. Effort is, like... It makes a difference because it's tough to keep giving it, right? It's like studying. Doesn't matter if you're smart—if you never study, you'll stop learning at some point. A sports match really means pitting your practice and the talent you've polished against theirs...don't you think? So it's like this... While this other first-year is growing, you can do plenty of growing, too, Kagiura. Right?"

Hirano was obviously thinking carefully as he spoke, and to Kagiura, his words were like cool water on a parched throat. Kagiura was almost frightened at how quickly Hirano seemed to have grasped the root of his smoldering frustration. Kagiura himself hadn't been willing to go so far into it, and it made him more aware of the heat in Hirano's gaze on him.

"Thank you, Hirano," he said after a moment, although he was feeling too shy to meet the other man's eyes. When he checked the clock instead, he found it was already time for first-years to use the bath. He jumped to his feet.



“Oh, the bath?” Hirano said quietly. “Kagiura... Er, that’s kind of a mouthful. Can I just call you Kagi?”

The question came so out of the blue that it stopped Kagiura in his tracks. He blinked for a second. “Huh? Yeah... Sure, that’s fine,” he said, but he wondered what had brought that on so suddenly. He still wasn’t entirely sure as Hirano sent him on his way to the bath.

From that day forward, his roommate began to call him Kagi. For Kagiura, it was only the smallest of changes in his daily life. At least at first.

A few days later, he bumped into Hanzawa in the cafeteria. “Hirano hardly ever gives anyone a nickname,” the dorm leader said almost admiringly.

“Just easier to say,” Hirano remarked blandly, but for the rest of the day, Kagiura felt like he was floating, knowing that Hirano had given him special treatment.

The sports festival came soon after, and with it an inter-team relay. The classmate who’d been so much on Kagiura’s mind was the runner representing the first-years, and he tore everyone else apart, even the high school’s actual track-and-field team members.

As he cheered the guy on at the top of his lungs, Kagiura privately resolved to find the young man later. *I’ve gotta tell him how glad I am that he joined the basketball team.*



Four days until final exams for the term. Members of the Disciplinary Committee were checking uniforms at the school gate in the morning, lest students start to slip in their sartorial discipline here at the end of June with a nice, long vacation just ahead of them.

Club activities were suspended for the period immediately before the tests, so there was no morning practice; this was the one time when the student athletes arrived at school along with the rest of the student population. Kagiura seemed to be taking the opportunity to demonstrate his sleeping prowess; somehow, it was harder to get him up now than it was when he had to get up at five in the morning.

Kagiura didn't need very long to get ready in the morning, but all the same, Hirano was a little worried that he would get in trouble, because he definitely looked like a guy who had overslept. He gave Kagiura a good talking-to before he left the room.

The inspections weren't a surprise; they'd been announced ahead of time, so there weren't many violations. It was boring, sure, but not a problem. Hirano stood there suppressing a yawn while the checks went on.

The first-years had only been in high school for a few months. Some of them were still nervous—and most of those nerves had to do with the dress code. Most of the rules were things like: When you're not on campus, make sure your buttons are fastened, make sure not to loosen the necktie of your winter uniform, and avoid loud colors or patterns on your vests or cardigans. In short, don't let your uniform look slovenly when you're out and about. It was all about how you looked outside of school—if you could get through the school gate, there wasn't much to worry about.

The dress code was lax enough that even dyeing your hair blond wouldn't get you anything worse than a self-reflection essay, so Hirano didn't bother redoing his dye job. The year before, as a first-year, he'd tried to take it seriously, dyeing his hair back to its natural dark color, but when he returned to blond soon after, he'd done serious harm to his hair. The dye didn't hold as well as he'd have liked, and the color started to run. Thinking about all the damage he could do

switching back and forth, he realized that having to write an essay was the lesser of two evils, and he decided that this year, he would ditch the blond for the closing ceremony at the end of the year, and that was all.

Kagiura arrived at school a mere five minutes before the final bell.

“Geez, you barely made it. I know I woke you up this morning,” Hirano said.

“Yeah... Sorry. By the way, can I ask you something?”

“Hmm?”

“Who’s that guy you were talking about earlier? The one you said looked like he’d been crying...”

Hirano did a lot of odd jobs around school and knew a lot of people, so Kagiura’s initial question didn’t clarify things for him, but those last few words narrowed it down. “Oh, you mean Miyano. A junior of mine on the Disciplinary Committee.”

“Are you, uh, close to this Miyano guy?”

Hirano wasn’t sure what to make of that question. “Close? Eh, I guess we talk. He’s a bit of a weirdo, though.” He was going to add that if Kagiura was curious about Miyano, he should poke his head into the next class over, but Kagiura didn’t actually seem interested in meeting his fellow first-year.

“Hmm.” Kagiura lapsed into silence and didn’t take another step. Hirano thought he looked like he was in danger of being judged in violation of school rules by the other nearby committee members, some of whom were glancing over at him, giving him odd looks. They expected him to move on; there was nothing wrong with his hair or uniform at a glance.

“Hey, it’s all good, but you’d better get to class, or you’re gonna be late,” Hirano said, giving Kagiura a gentle shove on the back. Kagiura’s face finally relaxed. *Huh. Freaked out about his first uniform inspection, huh?* Hirano started to smile, amused to realize Kagiura had this sweet side, when he heard a voice behind him.

“What’s Kagiura doing standing around?” the person asked. “Did he fail inspection?” The speaker was another student in an impeccable uniform,

suggesting he was a first-year himself. Apparently, he was also a friend of Kagiura's. His empty hands made it clear he'd already been to the classroom to drop off his stuff and had come back for some reason.

"Nah, nothing like that. He's my roommate," Hirano said.

"Ah! You're the famous Hirano, then?"

"What do you mean, famous?" Hirano asked sharply.

"I hear you're kind enough to wake him up in the morning. I'm Niibashi, same class as Kagiura." He gave a polite greeting, and Hirano simply said, "Sure," realizing how forceful he must have sounded.

Niibashi was a bit on the short side, which, combined with his boyish features, made him look like a middle schooler when he stood next to Kagiura. He looked a lot like Miyano, in fact, but his air of confidence made him feel completely different. The breeze puffed out his hair a bit, giving him a sort of "fuzzy" look, but his excellent posture and the fact that he was friends with Kagiura suggested he was into sports.

"Are you also the Hirano who's nice enough to get angry when Kagiura fails to take notes in class?"

"Seriously, what's Kagi been saying about me? What do you mean, '*nice enough to get angry*'?"

"Ah. I only ask because Kagiura once told me that if he didn't take notes, you'd get angry at him—but he looked rather pleased when he said it." From the way Niibashi grinned and looked Hirano right in the eye as he spoke, Hirano started to get a pretty good idea of the young man's personality.

He's an egotist through and through.

He was cute, he knew it, and he was going to make use of it. It might not seem like a very nice thing to think about his roommate's friend, but Hirano could already tell this was someone he wouldn't get along with.

"Y'know, I remember you mentioning you had a friend who let you copy his notes, Kagi. Try to take 'em yourself if you can, eh?"

"I'll try, honest. By the way, Niibashi, why are you here?"

Unlike Hirano, who was feeling a bit put off by Niibashi, Kagiura seemed to engage with him very directly. The rules of engagement in the dorm, not obsequious but rarely casual, meant that Hirano hadn't really seen Kagiura talking affably with his classmates before, and it was kind of nice to see.

"Cause you didn't answer my text! I went out of my way to let you know that we have to move classrooms for first period and that if you don't go straight to the new one, you'll never get there in time. You should be grateful! The teachers are already giving you the evil eye for sleeping in class." Niibashi was keeping his voice down so the people around them wouldn't hear, but Hirano was close enough to pick up what he was saying. He'd assumed Kagiura was just having trouble following the class material, but he was also sleeping during lectures, huh? No wonder he didn't always take notes.

Hirano couldn't help glancing at Kagiura, who looked away reflexively. The nerve of the guy. "When we get back, Kagi, I'm gonna run you through some past test questions," he said. Hirano was on the advanced track, while Kagiura was doing the general course of study, so their classes weren't quite the same, but the two groups had about the same first-year curriculum. Hirano had even had a lot of the same teachers as Kagiura last year, so he could teach Kagi most of the material.

Now, then...

Sighing a little as Kagiura scampered away, Hirano signaled the other committee members to pack up. Hanzawa, who was also the vice president of the Disciplinary Committee, would get their notes together and hand them off to a teacher. Several faculty members would be doing the uniform inspections for the students who made it to school by the skin of their teeth or were tardy.

It was the rainy season, but this was a rare sunny morning, and Hirano's head was scorched from being out in the sun.

Speaking of Hirano's head, he was, of course, the first offender disciplined by the faculty's dress-code inspection.



After class, Kagiura went straight back to the dorm, where he studied until dinner. When the meal was over, he went back to hitting the books all evening except for when he went to bathe. It wasn't a sustainable cycle for him. Sleep loomed.

When he would stop to stretch in the middle of his work because his whole body felt stiff, Hirano would help him, and it was at those moments that he considered just going to sleep. If he asked, Hirano might even let him use his knees as a pillow. He wasn't sure when it had started, but Hirano already woke him up anyway.

There had been complaints from nearby rooms about Kagiura's blaring alarm clock, but despite that, Hirano didn't simply give Kagiura a kick in the butt and send him on his way. He actually got up early himself and urged Kagiura gently out of bed. It spoke to how kind he could be.

Kagiura was one of four siblings, including one older sister, one older brother, and one younger sister, so he knew from experience that older brothers weren't usually this nice to their younger siblings—and that being an older brother didn't necessarily mean you would feel helpful enough to wake up a younger sibling. Even if siblings were close, they might not be that generous, but it left him thinking that he and Hirano felt closer than family.

Special treatment...

Kagiura thought he was starting to understand—really *feel*—what Hanzawa had said about Hirano's attitude toward him. He'd never had someone *care* as much about him as Hirano did, and he wasn't sure anyone else would care like that in the future. The real problem, he thought, was that there didn't seem to be anything he could do to help Hirano in return.

In order for two people to become special to each other, it couldn't be just one of them receiving all the caring. Kagiura couldn't spend all his time unloading on Hirano. But even if he told Hirano to lean on him if he needed anything, at the moment, it would sound like a joke. Hirano was so much more open-minded and tolerant, it seemed hard to believe there was only a year's difference between them. How long would it take Kagiura to become someone

a person like Hirano could and would naturally rely on if he needed something?

Anxiety churned in Kagiura's gut. Taiga Hirano was unmistakably attractive, and it was obvious how much the younger members of his committee admired him. Kagiura hardly intended to insist that Hirano should be "his" upperclassman and his alone, but he did envy those who knew Hirano in ways he didn't.

"Hey, you're zoning out again. C'mon, this is last year's test. You could work on the problems from this unit, but since it all comes from the textbook, once you know what you're likely to see, you should focus on the stuff that seems most likely to come up."

Kagiura opened his eyes—he hadn't even realized he'd closed them, hadn't realized that his consciousness had scattered to the four winds—to find a sheaf of already-graded tests being slapped down on his desk. The scores were good. Blindingly good. But of course...

"Right..."

Seeing Hirano's full name there alongside the designation of his first-year class was something new to Kagiura, and the novelty of it dispelled a bit of his drowsiness. Based on the student numbers determined by alphabetical order of students' family names, Hirano had been listed somewhere among the second half of the class.

Their fingers brushed as Hirano passed the papers to Kagiura, and Kagiura felt a faint warmth from the other man's hand. It was enough to make him notice that Hirano must be sleepy, too. He glanced up and saw that Hirano's eyes indeed looked a bit bleary. *Was he yawning?* He should tell Hirano to go ahead and hit the sack. Never mind him. Hirano never left things until the last minute. Even during midterms, he'd never been stuck at his desk right up until lights-out.

"Hey, sorry if I'm misreading this, but... You sort of copy your notes at random, don't you, Kagi?" Hirano said.

Kagiura was the picture of health, and his heart was sound, yet it hurt when Hirano landed such a precise blow. "Well... Yeah, sometimes, I guess."

“How much of the time?”

“Er... Uh, seventy, maybe eighty percent?”

“Oh, c’mon!”

Hirano must have been looking at the notebooks spread open on the desk. Kagiura could never be entirely sure how much he’d missed when he woke up in class, so he left arbitrarily sized blank spaces with the intention of copying from Niibashi afterward. When the notes he’d missed were too long for the space he’d saved, he just omitted the parts that didn’t fit.

“Yeah, I know... I have some systems. Like, I try to mark stuff in my notes when I don’t quite understand it. But in math class especially, I tend to write formulas in weird places, or I can’t get the figures to come out quite right. I’ve gotta admit, it’s not easy to study from.”

Kagiura felt the blood drain from his face; he knew how ridiculous he must have sounded. How could he not feel disheartened when it was pointed out so bluntly that the studying he’d been trying to do, in his own way, was essentially pointless? He’d hoped that by getting to at least fifty-fifty on stuff he understood versus stuff he didn’t, he might stand a chance of getting a passing grade even if he wasn’t exactly exceptional, but now...

“Is it that bad?” he asked.

“Yeah, probably. I mean, it doesn’t look like even last year’s test is making a lot of sense to you. You don’t get the problems, do you?”

“No...”

“Argh. It’s like... You know. I mean, I’m kind of guessing here, but the stuff on old tests, that’s, like, what they hope to teach you, right? I mean, a lot of the time. So it should tell you what’s important. Forget the application problems for now. Focus on basics first.”

Kagiura could only bow his head and agree. Hirano gave him a reassuring pat. Kagiura almost felt like his pet. He leaned his head over toward Hirano, who snapped, “Don’t sleep in your chair.” But that remark was shortly followed by another yawn. Kagiura grinned.



The next day, Kagiura had Hirano wake him up at six AM, thinking he would use the time normally devoted to morning practice for study. Hirano swore he wasn't really a morning person, either, but Kagiura had trouble believing it. He even thought maybe Hirano had just said it to make him feel better. When he took a close look, though, even as tired as he was, he could tell something was off about Hirano. His eyelids looked heavy and sometimes seemed to close of their own accord, and the yawns he couldn't suppress told the real story. Kagiura started to feel a little guilty.

So when, as Kagiura sat there in his wrinkled sleep clothes trying to suppress a yawn, Hirano ordered him to hand over his textbook, he did as he was told. Then he watched in perplexity as the other man began putting sticky notes here and there around the book. It finally occurred to Kagiura's sleep-addled brain that Hirano was picking out the parts that were likely to show up on the test.

"It all starts with reading the textbook. Come on."

Kagiura was accustomed by now to the sharp looks Hirano gave him, but he shrank into his seat, knowing how much trouble he was causing his roommate. He nodded obediently and tried to focus on the text. When he had finished reading the friendly, approachable explanation and looked at the test paper again, he discovered that he was indeed able to understand what they were looking for.

His real problem was that he had no confidence he'd be able to fill in the answers on the real test when he wouldn't have the textbook to rely on.

"Guess that's why I have to *learn* it," he said with a sigh.

Kagiura hadn't told anyone because it was a money matter, but he'd gotten special dispensation to attend this school because he'd had the best performance among the athletic-recommendation students. But his performance on the court wasn't matched by his performance in the classroom. If he wasn't careful, he might even end up with the lowest score of anyone in his year. Sure, he managed to keep up—he couldn't have been there otherwise—but, well, sometimes a person was just not very good at something.

The results of his midterm exams had been tragic. He'd done reasonably well in the subjects he liked, but there weren't very many of those. He'd done worse

than he did in middle school—his scores were below average in more than half his classes, and he started to feel like he was really in danger. Even when he worked his hardest, though, academics just didn't have the same *satisfaction* as sports.

Back in his first year, Hirano might've been able to spot this problem more easily.

Kagiura hadn't even been concentrating for thirty minutes when he stood up—at exactly the moment the cafeteria opened for breakfast.

"I wanna go for a run," he said, more eager to work off his pent-up energy than to get some food. He'd slept a lot later than usual the day before, so he hadn't noticed, but now he realized that getting up early triggered his habit to exercise. As if on cue from somewhere in his body, he became desperate to go outside.

"You know it's raining out, right?" Hirano said sharply.

"Man, it was sunny yesterday," Kagiura grumbled, doing some gentle jumping jacks. Hirano stretched, too.

"Well, you gotta study, rain or shine, so nose to the grindstone. There are no shortcuts in academics... Wait, are there shortcuts in basketball?" He sounded downright serious.

Kagiura gave it some thought. He could only speak for himself, but he remembered his heart pounding at the idea of basketball even before he'd ever held one in his hands. Whenever he saw a ball game, he intuitively understood how to make the same movement as the players. He'd been born with a talent for making his muscles do what he wanted, but until he'd encountered that first, fateful sport, he hadn't known what to do with it. After he'd discovered basketball, though, he'd known what he wanted to do with his life.

When he finally stepped onto a court for the first time, his sense for the game was so profound that everyone who saw him told him that if he could work on his accuracy a bit, he'd be an incredible player. If his practice regimen sometimes seemed brutal, it was only because he had such a clear vision of where he wanted to be.

“Okay, I’m gonna work hard,” he said finally.

“That’s the stuff.”

Kagiura couldn’t say he felt any better, but he thought maybe studying was for Hirano what basketball was for him. When you were on your given path, it was easy to follow, and you knew how to go about it, even if it took hard work.

Kagiura wished he could find a way—a path that might not have any shortcuts but wouldn’t be *too* long. It might not be much fun, but it was sure better than throwing in the towel.

As they went back to studying, the room filled with the comforting sound of mechanical pencils scratching across high-quality paper. There was a study room in the dormitory, but Kagiura had never used it. Over and above the unique qualities of the dorm, he felt like that room sort of belonged to the kids in the advanced classes, the ones who had gotten here by taking tests. He noticed, though, that knowing there was someone else studying right next to him as he worked helped him focus.

It didn’t make any difference to his stomach, however, which started gurgling promptly at six forty-five.

“I gotta eat something,” Kagiura said.

“I’ve got some chocolate.”

Kagiura was happy for the offer, but he said, “I need meat. Maybe some chicken...” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he regretted them; he wished he had accepted the chocolate.

As a general rule, you weren’t supposed to eat in the dorm except in the cafeteria. You could have a drink, but any little treats in your bag, you had to munch at school. Hirano was the one who had told Kagiura that, and here he was offering him chocolate!

“When it comes to chicken, I’m a yakitori guy, myself,” Hirano said.

Ahhh. So he liked grilled chicken skewers, did he? Kagiura filed the information away in his brain as he stood up. He’d reached his limit. He had to eat. “Hey, Hirano—someone told me once that it’s better to study on an empty

stomach than a full one, but I just don't think that's true for me..."

"Of course, if you keep going on about food. Let's get some breakfast," Hirano said, agreeing that a guy's got to eat. He rubbed his tummy as he slipped on his sandals.

Kagiura, drawn by how Hirano moved in the room's cramped entryway, almost reached out to touch him, but he forced his hand back. He took a step away from where Hirano was crouched by the door. He didn't mind jostling with his teammates as they changed in the locker room, but he didn't feel that close to Hirano yet. At the same time, he couldn't help but sense that he was overthinking it.

I'd like to be good enough friends with Hirano that I don't get an attack of nerves over something like this, he thought.

Hirano was already stepping into the hallway, looking perfectly ordinary. He was completely oblivious to the stirring in Kagiura's heart.



CHAPTER 2

SUMMER PREP.



“Huh? Hrmmm,” Hirano grunted as he looked over the uncharacteristically messy pile of his stuff. He’d been packing his bag to go home, but then he’d turned it over and emptied everything out. Still, he didn’t see what he was looking for. “Not here, either, huh...” He shook his head. He was out of ideas. He’d looked all over the room’s floor, of course, and under the bed—he’d even checked the hallway and the cafeteria.

He always took them off before he went to sleep, so there were only so many places they could be. Unfortunately for Hirano, things done habitually are often forgotten. Had he put them somewhere different from usual after he took them off last night? Or had something happened? He remembered Hanzawa showing up suddenly the night before.

The dorm leader had knocked furiously on the door. He’d claimed he didn’t need anything special, but he had looked strange. Uncomfortable. Had Hirano already taken them off by then? He couldn’t quite remember.

He did recall Kagiura showing up on his side of the room, rolling on the bed and remarking how nice freshly laundered sheets felt. It left the sheets all wrinkled, and Hirano had shouted at him to straighten them.

Unlike Hirano, Kagiura hadn’t put his sheets out before going to the bath, so his mattress pad was still visible. “That’s no excuse to go randomly lying in a person’s bed!” Hirano had exclaimed, shortly thereafter insisting that Kagiura take care of his own bedding.

No matter how I try, I just can’t seem to remember what I did with them.

Since he was missing both the right and left ones, the chances that he’d dropped them seemed slim. The clasps hadn’t been loose, and he knew they hadn’t caught on anything. Yet they were nowhere to be seen, leaving Hirano

scratching his head in frustration.

“What’s wrong, Hirano?”

A voice shook him out of his reverie, and he belatedly realized his roommate was back.

“Oh, hey. Nothing. It’s not a big deal, but I can’t find my earrings. I was sure they must be around here somewhere, but I’m not seeing them...”

Hirano never took them off except in the room, so they had to be in the dorm. Kagiura quickly crouched down. “I’ll help you look,” he said.

“Thanks, but don’t worry about it. I can do it. Just try not to step on ’em, okay?”

“Sure. But you’ve got to feel weird without them, right?”

“Eh. The holes won’t close up in just a day or two. I’m more worried about you, Kagi. Didn’t you say you had to go right out for practice after you dropped your bag off? Didn’t you promise your friends?”

With summer vacation almost upon them, and the accompanying steamy weather, the sports teams were on break, but Kagiura continued running regardless. He’d explained as much enthusiastically when he and Hirano had crossed paths at lunchtime. It was probably his way of working off the stress of the end-of-term tests. With the trouble studying gave him, the gloom of midterms had been hanging over Kagiura like a cloud.

The tests had gone perfectly fine for Kagiura, thanks in no small part to Hirano, who was quite good at looking after younger students. Kagiura got a score that was worth noticing, sports recommendation or no. In his own appraisal, he’d “studied like I was trying to get into college!”

There was a respite from team activities today so that the faculty adviser, current club president, and incoming president for next term could go to a conference at another school. Considering the heat, it was also something of an act of mercy, but having just survived the tests, Kagiura didn’t appreciate it.

“Oh, you’re right! Gotta go! See you later!” He looked like he was about to run all the way to practice.

Nice that he's able to be so energetic when it's this hot. Now that he got up at the same time as Kagiura and understood his lifestyle, Hirano had nothing but respect for how much more exercise Kagiura did than him.

"Sure, have a good workout," he said. He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face when he saw Kagiura being especially careful of his feet as he left, just as Hirano had asked him.

Ever since his new roommate had arrived, the place seemed unbearably quiet the moment Hirano was alone. Personally, Hirano thought that now that they had really jelled as roommates, they were as good a combo as you'd find anywhere in the dorm. That feeling was only amplified by knowing that just a year ago, he was the one who'd been the underclassman.

It was just a week or so until summer break now. *It's gonna be a little too quiet*, Hirano thought. His household was only himself and his parents, and his father sometimes lapsed into silent spells. Exuberance was not his "thing."

They all got along just fine; Hirano had no complaints about his family, but he couldn't help feeling a pang when he saw people his own age who were used to living with their siblings.

"Funny. I didn't even think about it last year," he murmured. He stood up and stretched his stiff hips.

He looked over at his roommate's messy bed, a testament to how bad he was at getting up in the morning. An oversize hand towel was still balled up on top of it. Hirano even pulled the sheets off Kagiura's bed, just in case his earrings were there (although it wasn't likely), and then put them back neater than he'd found them. Unfortunately, there was no sign of his lost jewelry. The titanium studs, his first piercings, were matte, which made them hard to spot.

Defeated, Hirano packed his stuff back into his bag and started in on his homework. During the break, he would be taking summer lectures at a prep school, along with a number of practice exams. For a student in their second year of high school, summer vacation wasn't much of a break at all.

To be fair, it wasn't as though all his courses were intensive lectures, and yes, he would have more free time than usual to play around or travel. But there was no question that the flow of his time would be different than it had been

the year before.

If Kagiura can just pass his classes, I'll bet he could get an athletic recommendation to college no problem. Hirano's gaze softened a bit at the thought—but it was a pointless fantasy right now. He started on the practice problems.

The cicadas buzzing outside seemed to fade into the distance, as if Hirano had entered a place cut off from the rest of the world. The circulation to his fingers must have been just a little too good, though, for his hand on his mechanical pencil seemed to itch.

Preparations for the cultural festival would be starting the next day. In the short time before the summer break, each homeroom class would have to submit their plans to divvy up the tasks and responsibilities for getting them ready.

Just deciding what they would do was an involved process: There was a two-step audition you had to pass, including a written proposal and then an oral interview. Only if you passed both those stages could you proceed to true planning.

The only things likely to get accepted are stuff you can do on a low budget in a small space. Fact is, it's likely to be a fight over who gets to do what food stall.

Preparations were so intense that some claimed studying for exams was easier than being on the Cultural Festival Committee at this time of year. Events were selected by a group composed of representatives of each class and year from the festival committee and the student council, along with a faculty member. The cultural festival was hard on the people who had to run it *and* the people who wanted to take part in it—and it all started this week.

Hirano's homeroom, second-year Class E, had already decided what they were going to do and were ready to tackle the vetting process. They planned to use two classrooms and the entire hallway between them to build a haunted house. By taking off the classroom doors and joining the rooms to the hallway, they could make use of a larger space than was normally available for a cultural-fest event, making it hard to guess where the "ghosts" and "monsters" would come from. And by having plenty of distance between the entrance and exit,

people going in were less likely to overhear people coming out talking about the surprises.

Taking over an entire hallway meant the event would be a one-way affair, so they had to do it somewhere near a flight of stairs, and they would have to give serious thought to how to evacuate in the event of an emergency. Decorating the classrooms would be time-consuming, not to mention they would need to make costumes. This cultural fest would demand some real passion, and Hirano, who belonged to a club that didn't exactly set his heart racing, had enthusiasm to spare.

Now, what about Kagiura?



On the blackboard, in large letters slanting slightly upward toward the right, the class rep had written: 1-A CULTURAL-FEST IDEAS.

Once a week, homeroom lasted an entire class period, so the students used a third of their “long homeroom” to brainstorm for the cultural festival, but so far all they’d come up with was basic festival stuff: a haunted house, a yakisoba noodle stall, and a shooting gallery. Crepes, buttered potatoes, and shaved ice had all been floated, although they were met with cries of “What is this? A date?”

That immediately produced a chorus of “I want a girlfriend!” and “We should do something girls will want to come to!” All the suggestions that came out of the attempt to target the female demographic, though, seemed misguided to Kagiura. When a guy didn’t have a girlfriend, his ideas about women could start to deviate from reality.

Given that they went to an all-boys school, there were pitifully few students who found girlfriends in their first term. It was even less likely for those living in the girl-bereft dormitory, and it was no different for Kagiura.

Not that he particularly wanted a girlfriend at that point anyway. He’d dated someone for a few months during middle school, but it had been nothing but nerves for both of them and had ended awkwardly.

He knew a few guys here who were in relationships. They had snapped up whomever they could find, and the women were cute and sweet; Kagiura could see why someone might like them. But they seemed so intent on acting lovey-dovey that he could never quite seem to approach them.

It was probably around then that Kagiura realized that when he thought of a significant other—someone he would want to spend his future with—he tended to picture his parents. They seemed less like a husband and wife, and more like a jovial pair of best friends. It was nothing obvious, like them being sappy all the time or giving up everything for each other or anything like that. They had four children together, and maybe that was proof enough of their intimacy, but in any case, one got the sense that they would have been fast friends even if they had been the same sex.

Kagiura imagined someone who would be courageous enough to give him a push if there was a path he wanted to take and loving enough to wait eagerly for him to come home again. Someone with whom he could spend calm, cheerful days, without having to put on an act or force anything.

Once he realized his parents were his relationship goals, he also decided he didn't want to just play around in relationships that wouldn't go anywhere. Not that he had ever been one for frivolous dates but having already learned from experience that it took more than passion to make things work, he naturally found himself willing to wait and see whom he would connect with.

He wanted to be like his mom, who would ask his dad "Do you want some, too?" whenever she was having a cup of tea. He wanted to be like his dad, who would come home with his mom's favorite snacks on a random evening, just because.

"Anyone have any other ideas? If not, we'll pick from what we've got by majority vote."

Just before the voting began, something popped into Kagiura's head. "Oh, I know! How about yakitori?" He remembered Hirano mentioning that he liked yakitori. Maybe he'd be happy to be able to have some during the cultural fest.

That thought put a note of cheerfulness into Kagiura's voice, and his idea garnered several exclamations of "Mmm, yakitori!" A debate started among the students.

"Would we need to cook it?"

"I think they sell frozen stuff at the wholesale supermarket."

"Where the heck would we keep it?"

"We could each take some of it. If we bring it in the morning of, we could let it thaw during the day."

"But do we do *tare* sauce? Salted? Both?"

"They both sound so good..."

The notion of trying to get girls to show up was forgotten, replaced by thoughts of satisfying the students' growling stomachs. High school boys do get

hungry, after all. They can eat breakfast, a morning snack, and lunch, then grab a bite after class and still take an extra-large helping of rice at dinner. With the student athletes, it was even worse, and Kagiura was no exception; he spent the majority of his monthly allowance on snacks.

With the majority vote falling firmly in favor of grilled chicken, the homeroom teacher, who had been watching the discussion play out, got slowly to his feet. “Food stalls are pretty competitive—lots of classes want to do them. And a yakitori place would have to be set up outside, so you’d need materials that could handle the elements. It’ll be tough to get this one approved if you don’t plan very carefully. I’d suggest deciding on a second choice as a plan B. Kagiura—it was your idea. You want to be our representative for the Cultural Festival Committee and brave the audition?”

He hesitated for only a second. It wasn’t about whether he was cut out for it—his mind’s eye was already full of Hirano’s grinning face.

“Gladly, sir,” he said, nodding firmly.

“I know you’re busy with team activities, Kagiura,” the teacher said. “Might be good for you to find some helpers.”

Kagiura immediately looked at Niibashi in the seat beside his. Niibashi might be a real talker, but he was meticulous and excelled at whatever he set out to do. Kagiura was sure there’d be no miscommunication or missed deadlines with Niibashi at his side. Not to mention that with his confidence, Niibashi was exactly the person to help pull off an event like this. The perfect ally—as far as Kagiura was concerned—for anything that would involve negotiations.

“What’s that? You want *me* to help? Well, I suppose you’ve got me... I know you can’t do paperwork to save your life,” Niibashi said. He might have acted annoyed, but his immediate willingness spoke to how close they had grown as they got to know each other over the past few months.

A hand shot up in the back of the classroom. “How many representatives can we have, sir? If you can be a rep and be on the committee at the same time, I’ll be happy to do it,” someone said. He was followed by several more people volunteering their time.

Ultimately, the class chose four representatives for the Cultural Festival

Committee, including Kagiura (the idea man) and Niibashi (his assistant). The committee's first meeting would be after class the next day; they would explain the materials and how to fill out the application paperwork. The four young men looked pained when they found out they would also have to help examine setups and tools, but it was too late to back out now.

Homeroom moved on to the next subject—namely, summer lectures and practice tests, topics that seemed intended to bring down Kagiura's mood. No matter how he tried, he couldn't seem to escape exams. He resolved to ask Hirano for some advice when he got back to the dorm, about both the festival and the tests. Hirano was a diligent student, and turning to him seemed likely to be much more profitable than complaining to his basketball team and getting some childish encouragement.

Come to think of it, I wonder what Hirano's class is doing for the festival, Kagiura thought, and closed his eyes. He could still see a faint image of Hirano's smiling face. He wanted to tour the festival stalls with him, a skewer of delicious yakitori in his hand.

It must have been the sunlight pouring through the window that made him imagine Hirano in a light-colored yukata—the classic summer-festival image.



“Hirano! I’m back!”

“Oh, hey, Kagi.”

Kagiura walked through the door half an hour before dinner. He was usually already rubbing his empty tummy by this time, ready to eat, but something seemed different today. Hirano’s first thought was that he’d bought a snack on the way home, but then he heard a noisy *guuurple* from Kagiura’s stomach, so evidently not.

Almost as soon as he set down his bag, Kagiura began to talk excitedly. “Has your class decided what you’re going to do for the cultural festival, Hirano? Our class is hoping to do a yakitori stall, and because it was my idea, uh...I ended up as our committee rep.” Fresh from his team workout, Kagiura gave off the faint but sharp aroma of antiperspirant. He seemed acutely worried about his body odor, but he never really smelled too sweaty.

“The cultural festival? We’re planning to ask to do a haunted house. Not sure if we can keep it within the budget, though. We’re planning something pretty elaborate.”

He went on about costumes and props, but Kagiura was looking at him in something like puzzlement. Kagiura was so tall that even on the basketball team you couldn’t miss him, but during a conversation like this, he still had a certain boyishness about him. Even with the often difficult-to-approach Hirano, his face had always been open and readable.

“A haunted house,” he said. “Isn’t that...kind of a couples’ thing?”

Huh, Hirano thought. *So he thinks about stuff like that, too.* It made sense—they were at that age—but somehow it surprised Hirano. Kagiura had never mentioned that he wanted a girlfriend or that he had a crush on anyone, and he’d never asked about Hirano’s love life, either. (Although given that they lived together, it was natural enough that Kagiura would know Hirano wasn’t seeing anyone.)

“I think we might see a lot more groups of friends than you’re thinking. Heck, I’ve been to one.”

“With who?”

“Hmm?”

“Who did you go with? To last year’s cultural festival?”

Hirano was quiet for a moment, confronted with Kagiura’s unusually intense gaze. It wasn’t like he’d had a girlfriend, plus he’d had to watch the stall sometimes, so there hadn’t been any one person for him to tour the festival with. Instead, there’d been a revolving door of people who happened to be free when he got off his shift, or who asked him to go in with a group on some expensive snack—that sort of thing.

“With Sasaki and some of the other guys from my class, I guess. I don’t really remember,” he said.

“And have you made any plans with anyone for the festival this year?”

“Nah. I mean, you wouldn’t go out of your way to make a date just to wander around with your friends, would you?”

“Me... It’d be nice to walk around with you, Hirano.”

Ah, Hirano realized, *so that was what he’d been getting at*. He felt his brow crinkle fondly. True, you probably wouldn’t meet up with someone from another class and year unless you agreed ahead of time.

“Sure. Okay, let’s check it out when we’re both off duty.”

“Can we really?”

“What with being in different years and different student groups, we don’t see a lot of each other at school, do we? Should be interesting to see you somewhere other than the dorm!”



“Okay! Let’s try my class’s yakitori, Hirano!”

“Huh, sounds good to me. I love yakitori,” Hirano said, adding softly that there hadn’t been any last year. Kagiura grinned to himself: *score*.

Now with that settled...

“So, Kagi, there’s two stages to the cultural-fest approval process, right? Really think you can handle it while you’re playing for the basketball team, too? Competition’s stiff to run food stalls—I think a first-year class is going to have it tough. You might be able to swing it if you did a café—you know, served drinks and stuff you could prep right in the room.”

With a menu consisting of items that didn’t cause smoke and things that could be prepared to order on a hot plate, the entire operation could be done in a classroom. True, they’d have to be cognizant of the load on the breakers—there was a limit—but they’d be a lot more likely to get approved than by battling for one of the limited outdoor spots.

“But I really want to do yakitori,” Kagiura said.

“Yeah? Give it your best shot, then. First, you’ve gotta deal with the paperwork. Talk to your teacher nice and early; he can show you some past applications.”

“All right, I think I’ll try asking tomorrow. The deadline’s not very forgiving, is it?”

“That’s part of the fun.”

Such a short turnaround time to put a plan together tested not only the class’s coordination but the committee rep’s preparation. And because prep didn’t start until after final exams, it had a minimal impact on grades. It was unlikely that students had any prior opportunity to experience allocating a budget and even potentially making a slight profit. When Hirano saw an underclassman he already watched over proactively involving himself in the process, it made him want to give some advice—maybe too much advice.

“By the way, Hirano, what part are you going to be playing in your haunted house?”

“No idea yet,” Hirano replied. The words came out easily, but they weren’t true; in reality, the class’s discussions had already settled most of the broad contours. They would take shifts playing different monsters, so one role would be played by several people, all sharing the same costume. Hirano was going to be one of the guys playing Oiwa, a vengeful spirit from one of Japan’s most famous ghost stories. Playing Oiwa necessitated dressing as a woman, but they all agreed it was better than playing Hanako, a ghost girl who was said to be stuck in a toilet stall.

Because of the shared aspect, more than half of Hirano’s class would be cross-dressing for the event. If they weren’t careful, it could even turn out to be most of them. Part of that was because so many famous ghosts were women, but it was also thanks to several students who were eager to work on their makeup skills. They reminded everyone that the year before, they’d wanted to make a horror movie but had been voted down by the class. As a member of the Disciplinary Committee, Hirano was anxious that the monsters not be played by roughnecks who just wanted to upset the visitors, so for him, being on the scare team was perfect.

Even if it does mean that I’m likely to spend the day dressed as a woman.

“I think you’d make a perfect *yuki-onna*, Hirano,” Kagiura said with a grin, referring to the spirit of a woman that was said to appear on snowy nights.

Hirano nudged him. “Don’t you have homework to do? Wrap it up before we have to go eat.” Hirano stood up.

“Yeah, no problem,” Kagiura said.

“Hey, don’t you wanna change first?”

“Oh! I almost forgot.”

Hirano worried he was nagging, but Kagiura didn’t seem upset by the reminder. It meant it was worth the effort to help take care of him.



Most of the basketball team's practice took place in the gym, but they did their warm-up run outside. Listening to the wind orchestra tuning up and practicing marches, Kagiura almost felt like they were urging him on.

He was covered in sweat, drinking constantly to stay hydrated. Squinting against the too-bright sunlight made him think of Hirano's golden hair. It was ironic that a member of the Disciplinary Committee would have hair like that, and unfortunately all that bleaching and dyeing had damaged it. A real shame, given how good it looked on him.

Then there were the small studs he wore in his earlobes, whereabouts still unknown. Even though it had been a whole week, Hirano showed no real concern; Kagiura seemed more worried than Hirano did. As long as it was stabilized, an ear piercing wasn't likely to close up, but it was still a wound. Leave it for too long, and the hole would definitely get smaller.

When Kagiura had asked him about it, Hirano had told him it was his first piercing, so Kagiura thought maybe he should put something in it to hold the shape. Hirano, however, simply said, "I took them both off together. I'm sure they'll turn up eventually." He was so nonchalant about it that you would never think it was his own possessions that had been lost.

Wiping the sweat from his neck with a towel as he jogged into the gym, Kagiura pondered what color jewelry would look best on Hirano.

Kagiura always saw Hirano wearing whatever he lounged around the room in; he didn't have a firm sense of what Hirano wore when he went out on non-school days. One might think he would have seen that every weekend, but Kagiura, who gave every day off to the team, didn't see much of Hirano on the weekends.

Meanwhile, he only really saw Hirano in his school uniform whenever Kagiura contrived to pass by him in the hallway. Hirano was the first of them to wake up in the morning, but he obviously didn't throw on his uniform before he woke Kagiura up. And he was the first to get back to the room after class, so by the time Kagiura got back, Hirano was already in his loungewear. So Kagiura had no idea what kind of accessory would look good with whatever Hirano liked to

wear.

No time to go out and buy something together before summer break, either.

What should he do, then? He was still thinking about it when the team was called together to start doing drills. He'd had it pounded into him that divided attention was the best way to get hurt in a hurry, so he promptly switched his mind to focus entirely on basketball. Interestingly enough, it also helped him stop worrying about being sweaty.

The gym was closed up tight, to take advantage of an indulgent amount of air-conditioning, and between the closed doors and the absolute focus, he could no longer hear the wind orchestra practicing.

Kagiura and his helpers easily got through the paper application stage, and soon thereafter they passed the interview with flying colors. Niibashi did every bit as well, or even better, than Kagiura had expected. His presentation, which he delivered with a smile that oozed confidence, was tremendously effective, and he had done his research. The fact that he had already considered what would have to be done in terms of food safety only added to the appeal of their proposal. He made it look like a stall that could attract customers even in the school's cutthroat inner courtyard space.

In just a few days, Niibashi had conducted research among their second-and third-year peers. It was a truly sterling performance. Everyone had agreed it would be a real trick for a bunch of untested first-years to get one of the coveted spots in the central courtyard, but Niibashi delivered an audition so polished it was hard to believe he'd put it together in such a short, hectic time.

Niibashi had a gift for networking and was already reaching out to other classes that would need similar materials. Kagiura and the other two committee representatives practically felt like *his* assistants instead of the other way around.

Unlike the student applicants, who were bursting with enthusiasm for their projects and on the edge of their seats to find out the results, the students on the judging side of the Cultural Festival Committee were, to put it generously, calm. To put it less generously, they seemed a bit disengaged, and that surprised Kagiura. He'd assumed that at a school that prized individual initiative

as much as this one did, the members of the student council would be people who loved planning and executing. Instead, the student council president, Touou, was fussy and particular.

He was comfortable giving orders, as befitting someone who'd become student council president despite only being a second-year. And even the way he lobbed questions about the proposals, sparing no one from his condescending glare, was somehow striking—but he didn't look like he was having much fun.

There was one more surprising thing: the way Niibashi calmly and completely handled Touou's interrogation, which sometimes approached the level of browbeating. It was enough to make Kagiura wonder if the two were friends, but he didn't want to interrupt the fun Niibashi was obviously having, so he kept his questions to himself.

Since it was almost summer break, they only had class in the morning that day. The basketball team would be taking a break from their workouts, too. The gym was unavailable because it was being used for inspections, plus the faculty adviser was away for teacher training and the coach was off, so there was no one to oversee practice.

The team members decided to take advantage of the situation to go to a sporting goods store. Kagiura, who knew his way around the place, decided to get a new pair of shoes, meanwhile giving advice and recommendations to the others. The school used this shop all the time—it made the team's uniforms—and it felt good to find out that the store owner knew him on sight, even though he was only a first-year, and to know that he was rooting for their team. He'd even come to some of their practice games.

Kagiura went back to the dorm with his heart dancing, eager to ask Hirano to come to a practice game, too.

Even after shopping and lunch, he was still back much earlier than usual; it wasn't even three o'clock yet. He could do his homework and still have time to goof off. "I'm back!" he said as he came through the door, but there was no answer. "Huh...?"

He didn't see Hirano's bag. He must have still been out. *Maybe he has a committee meeting*, Kagiura thought as he stretched out a sheet on the bed and started organizing his basketball stuff. Once he was cleaned up, he started his homework, approaching it just the way Hirano had taught him.

Bet he'll be surprised to find me like this, Kagiura thought. But he was disappointed—come evening, Hirano still wasn't home. Starting to feel anxious, Kagiura left the door propped open, but Hanzawa came by and closed it, remarking, "Open doors are a hazard to other students!"

Hanzawa was on the Disciplinary Committee with Hirano, which meant they weren't at a late meeting. "Hanzawa," Kagiura said, "I haven't seen Hirano yet. Do you know where he is?"

"Not a clue. But hey, he's not a kid. He'll be fine. I'm headed to dinner. You want to come?"

He was right: Dinnertime had started, and although there was a fairly generous window of time to eat, it was best to go early so you wouldn't overlap with bath time.

"Yeah, sure..." Kagiura really hoped it was nothing, but his heart was still beating faster than usual as he followed Hanzawa down the hall.

Hirano got back to the dorm just before dinner ended. Since he'd gone straight to the cafeteria without putting his stuff down, it was bath time for the first-years by the time he showed up at the room. Kagiura was just leaving and only had time for a quick hello, but he thought Hirano looked a bit angry.

Hirano often talked a little rough, but it was rare for him to seem genuinely out of sorts. Kagiura wanted to ask him about it but wasn't sure if he should. What if it was something too sensitive to discuss with him? Every day, he was self-conscious about the one-year age gap—and associated life experiences—between them. He felt anxious and wasn't able to talk to Hirano the way he did with his friends.

If this was something Hirano couldn't deal with himself, then the chances of Kagiura being able to help seemed awfully slim. And what if he made things worse by sticking his nose in? At the same time, he decided he couldn't just do nothing. He was still fretting about how to approach the subject as he left the

bath and jogged back to their room.

“I’m done washing up,” he called, knocking gently on the door, and was rewarded with “Nice, welcome back.” But Hirano sounded more subdued than usual. Kagiura found him sitting at his desk, and there was indeed a hard look in his eyes.

“What’s happening with you today?” Kagiura ventured, feeling like the intensity of Hirano’s gaze might overwhelm him.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you were pretty late getting back, but it didn’t seem to be a committee thing...”

“Oh... Sorry, man. You were worried about me?”

“Yeah. I was.”

Worry. That’s what it was. When Hirano said it, Kagiura realized. The clinging unease he’d felt all afternoon and evening was painfully similar to the lonely isolation he’d felt as a child when he was alone in the house. A swirling anxiety that gnawed at him and made him wonder if something had happened to his parents to keep them from coming home for so long, or if some awful fate had befallen his older siblings or his little sister.

“Oh... Well, it ain’t exactly a pretty story.”

“Yeah?”

“See, there was a fight at school today—really just a straight-up assault. One guy just attacked another. Totally outrageous.”

One of the junior members of the Disciplinary Committee had nearly stepped in to stop the fight, and one of Hirano’s friends had tried to stop *him*, then jumped in instead and ended up getting hurt in the process of breaking things up. Hirano had gone with his friend to the committee room and gotten his story, after which he’d also talked to the first-year who’d been hit and the junior committee member and then finally consulted with the faculty adviser about what to do—and that was why he’d been late. Hanzawa hadn’t heard about any of this because, although he was vice president of the committee,

the faculty adviser had hesitated to call back a student who'd already returned to the dorm.

"Wow... But you know who did it, right? Won't they be suspended for something like that?" Kagiura said.

"The guy who jumped in to help isn't much of a fighter, and the attacker got away. We know it's a first-year who did it, but we're coming up on summer break real soon, so I'm not sure there's much we can do. The interloper wouldn't say much anyway. Stupid time to worry about looking dumb."

As he talked, Hirano sounded more and more upset with his friend. Even more than that, he seemed annoyed. Something between regret and frustration.

Thinking about how it must feel to know someone wouldn't open up to you even though you were close, Kagiura reached out to Hirano, caressing his lovely golden hair. It was the reverse of their usual positions, but Kagiura thought it was what Hirano would do in his shoes: listen to him, comfort him, encourage him. Hirano would probably have been better at it, but for now, Kagiura lacked the words to hold Hirano's anger.

Hirano's eyes widened a little when he felt Kagiura's hand in his hair. "What are you doing?"

"I thought maybe this would help you calm down..."

There was a moment of silence, and then Hirano exhaled; Kagiura just caught the words "Hey, it really does..." Hirano's face softened into a smile. It was Kagiura's turn to be surprised. *I never knew he could look so gentle.* Hirano looked like a cat who had taken a shine to him.

"So how long are you gonna be, uh, petting me?" Hirano asked.

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than Kagiura's hand snapped back to his side. Even after Hirano went to the bath, though, when Kagiura was snug in bed, he could still feel the sensation of that golden hair on his palm.

When Hirano got back twenty minutes later, refreshed after washing the sweat off, he was no longer cheerless. He sat at his desk and pulled out what looked like a map of the school grounds, then suddenly he said, "I think we can

clean this thing up before summer break comes around.” He sounded downright excited, not sullen or angry. This was the Hirano Kagiura knew.

When Kagiura asked, it turned out that Hirano had talked to Hanzawa in the bath, and they had decided how they would proceed. Namely, they would trace the path the culprit had gone running off in, then talk to students whose clubs had been active in the area that afternoon in hopes of correlating eyewitness testimony that would allow them to pinpoint the guilty student.

True, it wasn’t terribly likely that people busy with club activities had taken much notice of a random student dashing by, but the hope was that the odd way he might have been acting after the fight would have attracted some attention.

With the concerted efforts of everyone on the Disciplinary Committee—including Hanzawa—and the support of the faculty adviser, they were indeed able to find the culprit before vacation started. Not only did the guy have a bad attitude, but this was his second violent outburst, so there would be no more slaps on the wrist; the school administration knew they had to deal with him.

All before the start of summer break, exactly as Hirano had said.

When Kagiura got back to the room after chatting with some of his teammates who also lived in the dorm, Hirano was already turning off his desk lamp and getting ready for bed. It was unusual for him to turn in without doing some studying or even reading a book, but Kagiura decided to follow his example and climbed into bed.

Today had been the last day of regular classes, and in two days, the end-of-term ceremony would be held. The basketball team had a workout in preparation for the practice game that weekend, but Hirano was going home right away. Kagiura wouldn’t see him again until the new term started. The realization brought on a wave of loneliness.

Applications for mock tests were behind him, but mornings all this week were occupied by supplementary lectures, so he wouldn’t have thought there was time to feel lonely.

I can’t believe I’ve gotten to a point where I can feel like that about him.

Kagiura had been startled by Hirano's flamboyant appearance at first—but, really, only at first. From the way Hirano had slid his slippers aside to the way he'd eaten Kagiura's green peppers, Kagiura had learned how kind Hirano could be before the day was out. He was more comfortable living with Hirano than he would ever have expected to feel around someone who wasn't a member of his family.

"Hey, Hirano?"

"Hmm?"

"You're going home the day after the end-of-term ceremony, right?"

"That's the plan. You're here till next week, right, Kagi? Got your practice game."

"Uh-huh. Plus, there are supplementary lectures this week."

"And you're attending them? Good job."

Honestly, Kagiura had been a bit worried about that. His grades had hardly been the top of the class, but he'd rallied at the end of the term and done just well enough that he wasn't *required* to attend the remedial lectures. He knew it would be best to attend them if he could, but he also had basketball to think about, and he could have justified being absent.

That said, the reason he'd mentioned it was because he knew very well that, left to his own devices, he would happily take the path of least resistance and put it off. But after all the help Hirano had given him, he would never betray the other man's expectations of him. At least...as much as possible.

"They promised they'd show us how to do the problems in the summer homework. You've never had to attend this sort of thing, have you, Hirano?"

"Nah. I'm a diligent student."

"Geez, humblebrag much..."

"Ha-ha. You're pretty serious yourself, Kagi. Keep it up next term."

"I will. Hey... Hirano?" He felt his heart start to race and clenched his fists as he lay on the bed. *Why? It's not like I'm going to say anything* terrible. "Do you have plans for summer break already? I mean, maybe around the end of July or

the beginning of August?” There was a note of tension in his voice as if he was confessing to a misdeed.

“That’s awfully specific. What’s up?”

“You want to go out to the countryside with me?”

“Hmm? What, you mean, like, since I’m going home anyway?” His words were dubious and slow, weighed down by sleepiness. Kagiura just prayed fervently that he wouldn’t say no outright.

“Yeah.”

“You’re not exactly out in the sticks, are you, Kagi?”

Hirano’s and Kagiura’s homes were both in the prefecture, even on the same train line. Ignoring the distance from the stations to their houses, they lived just thirty minutes apart by train.

“No, I mean my parents’ family home... Will you think about it? It’s a big place, so there’s plenty of rooms. It wouldn’t get cramped. And my relatives bring all sorts of people there every year, so you wouldn’t stand out or anything...”

He was just trying to make the most appealing case he could, but it was true. His cousin, a university student, would bring friends from his club, and relatives with small children were forever showing up with their whole clans to spend some time at a house they knew well. In short, Kagiura’s grandfather’s home was a busy place during summer vacation.

“How long ya gonna be there, Kagi?”

“I’ll catch the night bus on the thirtieth. Get there on the thirty-first. I was thinking, maybe stay two days and catch the night bus back on the third day.”

Until the year before, he’d gone with his family, so he could stay a little longer—but he’d figured this would be an easier length of time to invite Hirano. It was exactly the schedule he wanted, if possible. He had a reason he needed to stick to this precise timing.

Maybe Hirano saw that, but if he had prior commitments already, Kagiura would just have to give up...

“If your folks are all right with it, then that’s cool. No summer lectures around then, either.”

Kagiura sat up, taken aback by Hirano’s unfussy acceptance. His phone was on his desk, charging.

“Hey, you’re not gonna ask them about it right this second, are you?”

“Uh... I guess that’d be a bad thing, wouldn’t it?”

“Of course it would! Do it tomorrow. Look at the clock. It’s lights-out already. Time for using cell phones or other devices is s’posed to be over.”

Kagiura knew Hirano wasn’t usually this much of a stickler, so he understood that the other man was trying to stop him for his own good. Just another demonstration of what a decent person he was.

“Sure, you’re right. Good night, Hirano.”

“Yeah. G’night, Kagi.”

There was the click of a light switch, and then the room was dark. When the lights went out, all the anxiety and tension Kagiura had felt moments before vanished like a dream, and he soon fell sound asleep.



On the first night of summer vacation, for the first time since he'd entered high school, Kagiura spent the night alone.

The two-person room felt so large when he was in it all by himself. Because Hirano always got back before Kagiura did—and because he was a bit of a type A—he always kept the place clean. So now, even getting back and opening the door felt different. The very smell of the room seemed different without Hirano hanging out there.

Kagiura had heard it said that a house was a living thing, which was why it went to waste when its occupants were gone. He knew, too, how eagerly his grandfather anticipated those long holidays when the many empty rooms of his home would be filled with boisterous guests. Kagiura had never felt the truth of those things, not viscerally, but now that he'd left his family's house and moved into a place of his own, he thought he understood.

Someone needs to be there.

And two were better than one.

He talked to his parents and grandfather and had no trouble getting their permission to bring his friend from school home with him. That was all he'd told Hirano, but the conversation had taken something of a dramatic leap. He brought the subject up that night when he called Hirano while he had a chance to do so from the dorm.

"By the way, Hirano," he said, "my family said they figured my dorm roommate was probably used to me by now, and it would be fine with them even if you stayed for a week or two!"

"That's a long time. What am I supposed to be 'used to' anyway?"

"I'm not sure, myself... We *do* have visitors who stay for a whole week."

"That's really kind of them to offer, but it's way too long." Hirano chuckled. His voice sounded lower over the phone than it did in person. The higher tones were stripped away, and it sounded new to Kagiura.

“Summer lectures keeping you busy?” he asked.

“It’s not too bad. They wrap up by evening. What about you, Kagi? Everything going okay?”

“The team is doing fantastic. Sure wish I could go swimming in this heat, though.”

“Not that! I mean the supplementary lectures. You’re working on the problem sets before you go, right?”

“Yeah, I am. I’d better. They tell you which ones you have to do every day, or else.”

In a recent class, the teacher had told them that in his view, there wasn’t much of a fundamental difference in academic ability between the kids in the remedial lectures and anyone else—he believed that most students who claimed they couldn’t study simply weren’t in the habit of sitting down at their desks and doing it. Kagiura was inclined to agree with him. After all, he’d spent the entire term watching Hirano, who not only sat at his desk every day, but continued to study independently after finishing his homework.

Otherwise, it might have been easy to write it off and say, “My brain’s just not built that way.” But thanks to Hirano, he’d seen how daily effort created and built a gap.

“Probably better to face that in your first year. You’ll do better reviewing the first term’s material than just picking classes by feel.”

Kagiura wasn’t entirely convinced pure effort was the primary determining factor for scores—there were too many differences from person to person—but Hirano, who studied much harder than he did, had taken the time and effort to help him. He had to do what he could.

“Right,” he said after a moment. “I’ll do my best. But, uh...” He was already speaking quietly so he wouldn’t bother anyone in the hall, and now he dropped his voice even more.

“But what?”

“Without you here, Hirano, the room feels too big and quiet.”

He heard a sort of *hoo*, and Kagiura couldn't help closing his eyes at a tickle that felt as if Hirano's breath were right on his ear.

"You've gotta be sleepy, Kagi. Better turn in for the night."

He wanted to protest that he wasn't a kid who needed to be babied at bedtime, but Hirano was right; he could feel sleepiness weighing on him.

I don't want to hang up the phone. I want to fall asleep just like this...

He knew that wasn't possible, but to his own chagrin, he almost found himself saying the words.

He couldn't wait to see Hirano again.



CHAPTER 3

PRESENT.



Kagiura was standing at the meeting spot by the central exit ticket gate of the station, grinning like he didn't have a care in the world. "Hey, Hirano. Been a while... Or not, I guess. That outfit looks good on you."

It almost tickled to be complimented so openly, and Hirano couldn't help but look shy as he raised a hand in greeting and said, "Thanks. You too, Kagi." He fell into step behind Kagiura but almost ran into his huge pile of luggage.

They'd talked on the phone nearly every day since Hirano had gone home, making plans. They were just scant five-minute calls after lights-out, but the voice on the other end of the line sounded different from the one he was used to. Now, once again seeing the soft-spoken Kagiura face-to-face, Hirano felt like the other man had grown even taller. He couldn't hold back a wry grin.

They'd hardly been apart long enough to "miss" each other properly—summer break had only just begun. And yet here he was.

Hirano's mother had greeted his announcement that he was going to go visit a junior schoolmate in the country with surprise, while his father had looked amused.

"That's a bit sudden, but...well, all right," his mother had said, not sounding completely sure about it. Only then did Hirano realize how high-handed he'd been with Kagiura, as if *he* was the only one who needed to get permission. *What am I, his older brother, ordering him around?* The embarrassment of it caused his proverbial tail to stay between his legs, and when they saw each other, they exchanged greetings but not much more.

Hirano's luggage consisted of a gray Boston bag and a small bag he'd borrowed from his mother. The small bag held some modest gifts for his hosts; the day after he'd told his parents about this trip, he and his mom had gone to

pick out snacks that would last all day at room temperature. But what would be the right time to give them to Kagiura?

He'd always been the older dormmate, the guy on the Disciplinary Committee—but in the eyes of the wider world, he was still just a kid in high school. He'd pictured how they might spend time in “the country”—playing in the river, swimming in the sea, watching fireworks—and he'd carefully researched how to buy a long-distance bus ticket. But he hadn't even thought to consider how he would say hello.

The night bus, with its four-wide rows of seats, left the terminal at ten thirty PM and would arrive at Kagiura's rural station at nine thirty the next morning. Over the course of nearly half a day of travel, how could they not get hungry?

As such, as soon as they had double-checked where the boarding area was for their bus, Hirano and Kagiura went to the convenience store to procure provisions. As they worked their way around the almost blindingly bright convenience store together, all the awkwardness of meeting for the first time in a week melted away.

“Think a five-hundred-ml bottle of tea will be enough?” Kagiura asked.

“I'm sure there'll be a service area on the way. We can top off there,” Hirano replied.

“Ooh, how about some fried chicken?!”

“The entire bus'll be able to smell it!”

“Good point... I wonder what we should bring, then...”

They didn't want to be a nuisance to the people around them, so they needed something that wouldn't spill, wouldn't smell, and wouldn't make a bunch of noise while they were eating it. That narrowed down the possibilities pretty quickly.

“For a night trip, you want something that'll stick to your ribs. Like rice balls, maybe,” Hirano said.

“Think that'll be enough? Ooh, I want kelp in mine!”

“You do like your kelp, don't you, Kagi?”

“Uh-huh!”

Being away from school helped ease the sense that they had to act like an upperclassman and his junior. Instead, they just felt like a couple of guys going on a trip.

They scarfed down the rice balls almost as soon as they were on board, and while they were still checking out the onboard equipment, the bus driver gave the announcement that the lights would soon be put out. He politely requested that those using the reading lamps should take care not to bother their neighbors, after which there was much shuffling as people turned on their individual lights.

Hirano was one of them, switching on the reading lamp for the sheer novelty of it, but all his stuff was in his Boston bag, so he didn't actually have a book on hand. Unsure of what to do, he looked around and discovered that Kagiura had a blanket out and was very much settled in. He'd pulled his sling bag around in front of him to keep his most important belongings where he could see them. The seat, though, looked a bit cramped for someone as tall as he was.

“Not sleepy, Hirano?” Kagiura asked, adding that since he'd had a nice snack, he was ready to get some shut-eye himself. And indeed, it was obvious he was fighting to keep his eyes open. Hirano didn't blame him—it was already after eleven o'clock.

Hirano turned out his reading lamp. “Yeah, I am. I'm ready for some rest, too.” He spread out his blanket, adjusted his footrest and reclining seat, and pulled out a little bag with an eye mask. He glanced one more time around the bus and saw that only a handful of people still had their lights on.

Hirano opened his eyes again when he felt a gentle squeeze on his upper arm. The streetlamps were shining outside; they seemed so bright. At some point, his eye mask had begun to slide up, until it was just barely clinging to the top of his head.

“Hirano, we're there. At the service station. Let's get out,” Kagiura whispered, touching Hirano's arm hesitantly.

“Oh... Kagi,” Hirano grunted, blearily thinking back to the schedule. They were supposed to arrive at the service area around one in the morning. He'd only

been asleep for a few hours.

Hirano was hardly a morning person—on an average day, well, it wasn't impossible for him to get up, but it could be a struggle. But he knew it was even worse for Kagiura. Yet now it was Kagiura waking him—what could he do but drag himself out of his seat?

He worked his way up, noticing how cold his exposed arms felt in a short-sleeved shirt. Just standing up started to get the blood moving.

"They said we've got fifteen minutes. It'll make life easier if we get out and stretch a bit. Most people have."

Hirano took a look around, and it was true; most of the seats were vacant. He was afraid to work his way down the narrow aisle to use the onboard toilet. Going outside seemed like a better idea.

Hirano let Kagiura lead him outside, where the lights of the service area buildings shone under a night sky that stretched as far as he could see. There were several other buses there, too, along with a crowd of private cars; the place was actually pretty busy.

"Night buses turn out to be pretty chilly," Hirano remarked as they walked toward the facility. He wished he'd brought something with long sleeves.

"Yeah. The blanket's not quite enough, is it?"

Maybe it was all the greenery around that made the night air tingle even though it was the middle of summer.

"It hardly feels like summer," Hirano said.

"Wish it was this cool during the day!" Kagiura said. As they walked along, he swung his arms and legs cheerily. The bus must really have been a tight squeeze for him.

They headed for the restrooms at a quick trot and took care of business, then Hirano got some corn soup from a vending machine that dispensed its product into a Styrofoam cup. He wasn't hungry—he just wanted something warm in his belly.

"Hot! Hot!" he said, blowing on it, but unlike in winter, the soup didn't seem

to want to cool down. He was taking little sips, trying not to burn himself, when Kagiura, who had been off buying more rice balls, gave him a funny look.

“You gonna bring that on the bus, Hirano?”

“Nah. Smells too strong.”

“Can I have some, then? We’ve only got three more minutes.”

“Ugh. Sure. All yours, Kagi.”

“Don’t worry—I’ll take care of it!” When he grinned, Kagiura’s handsome features made him look like a pop star. Hirano overheard a couple of what he took to be college girls walking by whisper to each other: “Check that guy out!” and “Yeah, he’s a hunk, huh?!”

Kagiura wolfed down half the soup and handed the cup back to Hirano. “It’s not hot anymore, so no worries.”

Hirano obligingly tipped the cup toward himself, feeling the temperature of the soup against his lips. “Hey, you’re right.” He finished the snack in two big swallows, then tossed the cup and hurried back to the bus. They made it with a minute to spare—they were the last of the passengers to get back on board.

Hirano and Kagiura chuckled at each other (just moving their lips, not making a sound), and Hirano made sure to pull his blanket all the way up to his shoulders. There was another brief announcement, and then the bus trundled off once more into the night.

Thanks to the warmth radiating from his tummy, Hirano slipped quickly off to sleep.

They took their time having a breakfast of curry at a café by the station, then people-watched in the station shopping center until their ride came.

Kagiura’s aunt greeted Hirano warmly. “It’s so sweet of you to come from so far away. Our Akira owes you so much.” It seemed they were going to stop at a supermarket on the way before they got to what everyone referred to as the “main house.”

From what Hirano could see of Kagiura’s aunt as she drove along, she looked

a lot like Kagiura. “You and Kagi look a lot alike,” he said.

“You think?” Kagiura grinned broadly, and that expression of warmth made them look even more similar.

When Hirano got out of the car at the main house, he stopped and stared in amazement.

“It’s huge!”

“Right? Perfect for big gatherings,” Kagiura said.

Hirano had already been overwhelmed the moment he noticed there were *six* parking spaces, and as he started to grasp the scale of the house, he found himself even more speechless at just how big Kagiura’s grandfather’s home was. Sure, Kagiura had said it was large, but this was at least twice the size Hirano had been imagining.

The style of the house was old, but it had been well-maintained—you could nearly call the place a mansion. Just like Kagiura had said, they were out in the countryside, with rice fields and idyllic scenery as far as the eye could see. The sky spread wide above their heads, a river bubbled nearby, and there was an irrigation canal for farming as well—fast-flowing, Hirano noted, and probably dangerous for kids.

“Geez, this place really is gigantic... Do you ever do cookouts by the riverside?”

“I haven’t, no,” Kagiura said. “But I used to play in the water a lot there. It’s easy to get down to, and there’s all kinds of fish and animals.”

“Huh...”

The path to the front door was paved, so Hirano didn’t have to worry about his footing as he took in the scenery. It was a long way from the house, and it threw off his sense of distance.

As they walked through the front door, he counted more than ten pairs of shoes immediately in the entry hall. The entry hall was especially spacious, and the step up into the house itself was, likewise, wide and inviting. It was as if he’d stepped into the past—right into an old photo of a traditional Japanese

home.

“We’re here!” Kagiura called.

“Thanks for having me,” Hirano said. He followed Kagiura’s example and left his luggage by the door, only pulling out the snacks he’d brought as a gift and then following Kagiura into the house.

They were greeted by a couple of noisy, grinning children.

“Akira!” one of them said.

“Akkii!” squealed the other.

“Whoa! Haven’t seen you since spring break!” Kagiura said. Judging by their ages, maybe they were his cousins? Kagiura was certainly the oldest of them, and was acting like it, making him look more mature than he often did.

Where were the adults, though? Kagiura’s aunt, the one who had driven them here, had left them at the front door, saying she would go around to the side entrance.

Where and when can I give them these? Hirano thought, uncomfortably aware of the heavy paper bag he was holding.

“Oh—*ahem*—this way, Hirano,” said Kagiura, who was working his way down the hallway while in the midst of a sword fight with a boy who looked to be about five years old. They were each wielding newspaper swords (where had those come from?), Kagiura holding his in just one hand. Hirano thought he might take it easy on a five-year-old, but he parried every one of the child’s attacks as if loath to ever let himself be struck. He was grinning, but also clearly serious. It looked like a hard-fought battle.

Kagiura beckoned Hirano down the hall, and as he followed, he found a little girl falling into step beside him. She definitely reminded him somehow of Kagiura, especially her hair. He thought maybe she’d mistaken him for one of the adults, since his legs were probably about all she could see.

When he asked “How old are you?” however, she responded cheerfully, “Four!” Whatever she thought of him, apparently she wasn’t too worried. She helpfully held up her fingers so he could see them—three of them. He found it

oddly amusing not to be sure which was the right number. He couldn't help picturing his roommate at that age, making the same kinds of silly mistakes. It helped him relax a little, so he was able to amicably greet Kagiura's grandfather, who was relaxing in a Japanese-style tatami-floored room, listening to the radio.

He delivered the treats he'd brought, which would be offered on the family's Buddhist altar before being put out as snacks later in the day. Soon enough, they were being called to lunch, and Hirano was introduced to the family properly.

Kagiura's parents and siblings would be here during the Obon holiday in August, the others said. When asked why he'd chosen to come back now, Kagiura said, "I wanted to be here before the jellyfish came out in the ocean."

He took some ribbing for his "weird reason," and it turned out the family didn't swim that much anyway, since riptides were common at the nearby beaches.

Just at that moment, Kagiura's eyes caught Hirano's, but quickly flitted away again. The real reason seemed to be that it would have been uncomfortable asking a friend to tag along during a holiday.

The afternoon turned out to be very busy. After lunch, they took the kids down to the river to play, and no sooner had they gotten back to the house to rehydrate than they were playing ball. There wasn't a moment to rest. Hirano had every intention of keeping up with Kagiura, but by now, the difference in their stamina was clear, and before he knew it, Hirano was mobbed by small children. He thought they were just playing, but when one of them said "I'll save you!" he realized they were taking pity on the guest.

He'd borrowed a straw hat to keep off the beating sun, but he had changed into a swimsuit to get in the river and ended up with his torso pretty badly burned. The prickling pain got worse and worse, and when he got into the bath, he took a critical hit.

Hirano was lying limply in the second-floor bedroom he'd been given when Kagiura, who'd gone to bathe after him, appeared with a tube of some kind of cream. "They said your back is bright red, Hirano. Here, let me put this on for

you. It's meant for sunburns, and it should help a little."

"Oh. You heard?"

"Yeah. Sounds like you were in a lot of pain when you washed your back."

Hirano, who had been watching over the kids, had also somehow found himself in charge of bath time and wound up in the tub with three boys ranging from kindergarten to lower-elementary-school grades. One of them had been the enthusiastic newspaper swordsman.

"I was! I hadn't been thinking about it too hard, but scrubbing my back was agony."

"Must've been tough to keep them calm."

"Yeah—I didn't. They won't even hold still while you're trying to dry them off."

It was nice that the kids weren't intimidated by Hirano's golden hair, but they were always jumping and running around, so they seemed to get wet again as soon as they were toweled off, and in the end they put on their pajamas with their hair still damp. It was a real chore.

"Huh? They can dry themselves at that age," Kagiura said.

"You're kidding."

Kagiura chuckled. "You're just a softy, Hirano. You take it too easy on them. Take off your shirt, all right?"

"You'll put that stuff on for me?"

"Sure."

Hirano pulled his T-shirt over his head, cringing as the fabric scraped across his back. The feeling of cool fingers working their way around his shoulder blades was indescribably wonderful.

After such a hectic day, Hirano had expected to turn in early, but strangely, he just didn't feel sleepy.

"There's a lot of manga in this room," Kagiura suggested, so Hirano grabbed the middle volume of a comedy series and started reading. He was worried that

reading in bed would make his eyes go bad, but there was no chair in the room, and anyway, this was nice.

Had the little kids already gone to sleep? When he glanced at the clock, he suddenly realized it was nearly midnight. Where had the time gone? He glanced over at Kagiura. This would have been well past Kagiura's bedtime as recently as the previous day, but he was still wide-awake.

"Not sleepy, Kagi?"

"Ehhh. I took it easy this morning, so I'm all right."

Right—with the night bus getting in as late as it did, Kagiura had probably gotten a good three hours of sleep more than he did on days when he had practice in the mornings. Hirano, not much more of a morning person than Kagiura, had likewise gotten a little extra sleep today. If they didn't get to bed soon, though, it would leave them sleepy the following day.

"I think we oughtta turn in soon anyway," Hirano said.

"No, give it a moment longer," Kagiura said.

"Hmm? Thought you already reached a good stopping point in your book."

The manga had been put away, and Kagiura had looked even more ready for bed than Hirano—but for some reason he shook his head. Then he pulled his cross-body bag over and took out a little paper bag.

"Birthday," he said, holding the bag out to Hirano.

Hirano's eyes widened. "Huh?" He shook off the surprise and looked at the clock, then burst out laughing. It was just past twelve AM on August 1st.

He had to try not to laugh too loud because it was the middle of the night, but it was awfully hard on his abdominal muscles! Kagiura looked concerned for a moment, not sure what to make of how Hirano kept laughing, but when he realized Hirano was accepting the present from him, he smiled, satisfied.

"Happy birthday, Hirano."

"Look at Mr. I Know Everyone's Birthdays over here!" Hirano said. But then he added, "Thanks. Heh. Sorry for laughing." He'd been surprised—and happy. He didn't say it out loud, but the fact that he couldn't keep the smile off his face

probably gave him away.

“I’m glad you’re having fun!” Kagiura had a goofy smile on his face, and by now Hirano was sure he looked exactly the same. He looked in the bag to discover a small box. Some sort of accessory. Feeling a rush of excitement, he popped the box open. The inside was lined with velvet, on which sat two studs in cool blue.

“No way...,” he said.

“It’d suck if your piercings closed up, right? You can use these every day, Hirano.”

Nodding in agreement, he went over to the mirror stand in a corner of the room and tried the studs in his ears. Maybe the holes really were closing up, because they didn’t go in quite easily; there was a little resistance as he slid them into place.

Once he had them both in, he went back over to Kagiura, who grinned again at the sight. He looked so happy it was almost hard to tell which of them had gotten the gift.

Hirano took the studs right back out again—it would be too easy to lose them, sleeping with them in—but he knew he would put them in first thing when they got up in the morning. With that thought in his mind, he went to sleep, and it was a very sound sleep indeed.





They put on their sandals and headed around to the garden by the veranda, the children growing more and more excited as they opened a bag of fireworks. Watching them pull the collection of little sparklers and small fireworks free and pass them out, Kagiura felt for the first time like summer had really come.

He lit a candle, dripped some of the wax onto the ground so there would be somewhere to fix the candle down, and then set it in place. Until last year, one of the adults had always done that job, but this time around, the duty had shifted to Kagiura. As for the job he'd done the year before—getting a bucket full of water—he entrusted that to one of his younger cousins. The boy who'd once pounded his own shoulders, declaring that he had “the very most important job of all” when it came to the fireworks, was practically an old man now!

Three sticks of mosquito-repellent incense were burning on the veranda, and his elementary-school-age cousin, who'd just arrived that morning, was dressed in full protective gear: long sleeves, long pants, and even socks. He looked ready to go camping.

Another cousin—ten years older than them—had knocked back a beer and then gone to sleep for a while. Now he was sitting on the veranda, keeping an eye on things.

The fact that Hirano was there with them was at once thrilling and somehow surreal—but it certainly made Kagiura happy. He was already wearing the studs Kagiura had given him, which sparkled brilliantly in the firelight. Kagiura had mentioned the occasion at the breakfast table, and the whole family sang “Happy Birthday” as they ate their breakfast of fish. Then Kagiura's aunt had promptly gone off to buy a cake. Hirano was apologetic for the trouble but privately seemed thrilled.

White smoke drifted through the air, accompanied by the odor of burning fire powder. Once in a while, a large bug would skitter by them, but after a few minutes they all stopped noticing, captivated by the beauty of the many colorful fireworks. As soon as one burned out, another would be lit, and then another.

For as quickly as the children traded places in front of the package of fireworks, it was a wonder no one bumped into anyone else. When the package was almost empty, they divvied up the two kinds of sparklers between them, trying to see who could hold on to the tiny, climbing ball of flame the longest.

“It’s so beautiful,” someone said in wonderment, and no one could quite be sure who.

Then the flames from the sparklers dropped to the ground, and everything was suddenly dark. All the fireworks went in the water bucket, people collected their trash, and the candle was put out.

“It’s dark out here. We’ll do the cleanup tomorrow,” Kagiura said. Even though the words were coming from his own mouth, he felt like someone else was saying them. It was as if he himself had burned bright and then been extinguished with the fireworks, his very presence melting into the night. He almost thought he could still feel it, the faint heat at the tips of his fingers.

“There weren’t enough Flaming Spears in that package,” Hirano mumbled, and suddenly Kagiura found the idea of heading straight for the bath almost unbearable.

“Wanna go get some more, then?”

They stood in the entryway putting on bug spray. They had only their wallets in their pockets, and Kagiura’s aunt had told them how to get to the store.

“Akiraaa! It’s dangerous out there! Be sure to take your cell phone!” she called from inside the house, but Kagiura pointedly didn’t go back for his phone. While he was with his family, he tended to leave it even after it was charged. He glanced over at Hirano as they were putting their sandals on, and he also grinned a bit and held up his empty hands. He didn’t have his phone, either.

They wouldn’t even know what time it was. Kagiura’s feet almost felt light at the exhilaration of knowing they were free of the dorm’s strict schedule.

The lights of the town glowed in the distance, and it was so dark that they could only just see where the path dropped away into the irrigation canal. The cries of insects that only came out at night tickled their ears. It almost gave them the feeling that summer was ending, even though there wasn’t a hint of

chill in the air.

It was still only the first day of August. Hirano's birthday.

There was plenty of summer left.

"So where are we going, Kagi? Convenience store?" Walking through the damp night air almost made Hirano feel as if he were a kid again, spending summer vacations just as he had back then.

Walking slightly ahead of Hirano to show him the way, Kagiura nodded. "Yeah, I think that's a plan."

He knew that with a few shortcuts, they could soon be at a twenty-four-hour supermarket that had an excellent fireworks selection. Getting to the convenience store would take twenty minutes or so if they went straight down the road, a bit more if they didn't walk too fast. That way they'd have more time together.

"I wonder what we'll do if they don't have any fireworks," Kagiura said. It seemed very unlikely—this was the season, after all—but somehow he couldn't help himself.

"Buy some ice cream and go home?" Hirano answered. Kagiura got snacks to eat on the road all the time, but this was the first time he'd heard Hirano say anything of the sort.

"They'd melt by the time we got back."

"So we eat 'em while we walk. Only need to get enough for the two of us."

"Ahhh..."

"What? Eager to bring a present for your cousins?" Hirano asked.

"Eh... More like others did the same for me when I was little, so I thought maybe it was what you were supposed to do." He had a little more money in his pocket, since he didn't have to buy his own snacks while he was with his family, plus his relatives had given him a nice bit of pocket change. Both of those reasons came to mind, but he didn't say them. Even if he'd had a bit less cash on hand, he figured he still would have wanted to indulge those kids.

"Huh! I like the way you think," Hirano said.

“Oh yeah?”

They kept their voices down so they wouldn't echo around the darkened road, and it almost gave the impression that they were melting into the night themselves. As he listened to Hirano, Kagiura was seized by the feeling that they were going somewhere much farther away than the convenience store, and he swallowed heavily.

“Yeah.” After a beat, Hirano continued, “Your family's a lot like you, Kagi. I've never met them before, but I totally feel like I have. Before we got here, I was worried I might be an outsider, but you were right—I'm glad I came.”

“You already fit right in, Hirano. And you're great with the little ones.”

“Yeah, well, I've spent a long time living with youngsters.”

“Oh? I thought you didn't have any little brothers or sisters.”

“Dumbass. I meant you, Kagi.”

“Do I really seem that much younger than you? Am I that much of a handful?”

“You've got morning practice every day, but you can't wake up on your own. They say you fall asleep during class all the time. And you suck at studying, so you need someone else to light a fire under your ass before a test.”

Kagiura's eyes brimmed, but he found he had no comeback. Hirano was hardly wrong, after all.

Hirano grinned at him. “Yeah, you're a handful. But I know you're trying your hardest, and I know you're a decent guy. Your team is taking a pause from practice during the break, but you're not, are you? I saw how well-used the hoop in the garden is. Everyone told me how you spend plenty of time shooting even on vacation, and that's when I was like, ‘Hey, Kagi's really serious about this basketball thing.’ I was really impressed, man. If you work that hard with the team, no wonder you're tired in class.”

The gentle cadence of Hirano's voice drifted to Kagiura's ears, and he felt as if those words were warming his entire body. If he'd felt as if he were fading into the humid night before, now it seemed he stood out sharply; he could feel the hot blood coursing right down to his fingertips.

He'd always resisted complaining on the days that he was tired, so much so that he wanted to shout from the rooftops that of course you would work hard on what you loved to do. Not because you wanted the results of your effort to be praised and admired throughout the world. In part, he'd hoped to make up for what he lacked in academic ability by excelling in a field where he was more gifted.

Because of all that, when he received such unadulterated affirmation, Kagiura wasn't actually sure if it was all right for him to accept it and celebrate it uncritically. He wondered for a moment if he hadn't tried too hard to look good for Hirano.

But he soon remembered: Back in May, shortly after the semester had started, when Kagiura had been pathetically jealous of one of his teammates, hadn't Hirano spoken well of his abilities then, too? He seemed to know full well the pain of panicking into comparing yourself against someone who was starting from behind you.

Finally, Kagiura said, "Thanks, Hirano."

They crossed an intersection, waiting awhile because the light worked on a sensor that didn't notice them right away. Then they were on a street with more traffic lanes but also a wider sidewalk, a large thoroughfare lined with recognizable chain stores. As they passed a searingly bright video-rental place, Hirano remarked wryly, "I'll bet the police would take us home to our parents if they saw us go in there."

There were still a fair number of cars going by. Kagiura and Hirano walked side by side, and even as he felt his own heartbeat in his fingertips, Kagiura unmistakably felt his hand brush Hirano's. He glanced briefly in Hirano's direction to see the brand-new studs glittering in his earlobes. They were a gentle blue color, not unlike Hirano's eyes, and the way they shimmered seemed to make the night road even brighter.

"Those ear studs look really good on you, Hirano," he said. He felt a rush of pride; he had picked them himself, after all. He smiled broadly at Hirano.

"Well, that's because you made a great choice, Kagi," Hirano said.

It was true, wasn't it? Kagiura wasn't exactly with Hirano twenty-four seven,

but they were together from the time they got back to the dorm in the evening until they both left in the morning. Kagiura probably spent more time with Hirano than anyone else.

It was only natural he should be able to pick out the perfect accessory for him.



CHAPTER 4

THE FALL.



The sun was just as relentless in September as it had been in August. Even without it, the dorm would have been warm enough as summer vacation ended, packed as it was with people. Lots of team members came back with tans, looking especially in shape after having spent the summer break practicing with other teams or in training retreats. They had that special energy of those who had kept up their physical fitness routine the entire time.

Hirano's roommate was among them. He had grown noticeably, and the vague sense of unease he'd seemed to feel when he first got to school was nowhere to be seen. He was entirely at home here now. Summer break had made him even more congenial, and Hirano felt like he'd gained a younger brother he was especially close to.

I guess maybe a younger brother doesn't give you ear studs as a gift, he thought. But he didn't have any siblings of his own, so he couldn't be sure.

As Hirano was rooting around in his schoolbag, organizing his things after getting back from Kagiura's place in the country, he'd found the first pair of earrings he'd lost, rolling around at the bottom of the bag. They must have gotten hidden in the bottom support.

Hirano had briefly wondered what he should do, but then decided not to worry about it and didn't change the studs he was wearing. He kept the old ones around the dorm, just in case, but by and large he planned to keep using the ones he'd gotten from Kagiura.

With the beginning of the new term, preparations for the cultural festival picked up speed. Even the first-years, who weren't used to tackling a project without a teacher's guidance, gradually started to stretch their wings. The committee members had a particularly heavy burden, and without the help of

their classmates, they would never have been able to find time to study.

As it was, Kagiura had basketball on the mind and his grades weren't so good. Hirano hoped that taking on yet more extracurricular responsibilities wouldn't make them worse—but he knew it would depend on how much effort Kagiura put in. It was hardly as if the committee members were the only busy ones. Around this time of year, every student was pushing themselves for the cultural festival, and the sports teams had to keep practicing hard in preparation for the fall tournament season.

Add the fact that the nights hadn't gotten any cooler, and it wasn't an easy time. Meanwhile, most students could hardly wait for the cultural festival. It might be fair to say that was the case for all of them.

Girls would be coming! Otherwise, how could it be a festival?

On the one hand, the Disciplinary Committee insisted that everyone be particularly scrupulous about their looks and behavior, especially with the entire school in such a state of excitement—but in reality, they didn't give people too much grief over things like hairstyles or uniforms. After all, on the day of the festival itself, many of the students would be in costume. Every year, there was at least one class that even dressed up as girls.

That's right, and this year, it was Hirano's class. Hirano himself would be among the cross-dressers as the famous ghost Oiwa. Oiwa appeared in the ghost story "Yotsuya Kaidan," where she died still furious about her treacherous husband, Iemon, then proceeded to curse to death all those who had been involved. A number of variations of this well-loved story existed, and Hirano's class would be basing their costumes and makeup on the ghosts presented in the "Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan," one of the most popular versions.

Hirano was shown reference images of faces hideously disfigured by poison—Oiwa's fate in the tale—and they were stuff that would be downright traumatic when people saw it in the dark. The artists decided to go with the Halloween-style makeup that was so popular these days, and today after class they did a trial run on Hirano, checking his skin color and how everything looked. The result was spectacularly grotesque. They prayed they could keep the secret safe until the very day of the haunted house so it would have the greatest possible

impact.

Hirano was just finishing up his homework when the door opened with a click. His roommate was back. It was still light out, but the hour was late enough that dinner had already started.

“Hey, Hirano, I’m back,” Kagiura said.

“Welcome back, Kagi,” Hirano replied.

These days it seemed like Kagiura always looked a little shy when Hirano welcomed him back. He was able to greet him without worrying about any misunderstandings.

They had spent some time together over the summer, sure, but the break had been long. There was something fresh and new about Kagiura now that he was used to living in the dorm—and probably about Hirano, too, he suspected. He felt closer to Kagiura than before, no doubt because he’d met his family and relatives.

Hirano was in his second year of living in the dorm, but without him quite realizing it, his need to act like the more experienced roommate had begun to ease and fade away.

Hirano and Kagiura hurried through their homework almost as if it were a race, then headed for the dining hall a bit later than usual. It always did take three or four days to get reacclimated to the rhythm of life in the dorm.

It was then that Hirano remembered how before his underclassman had arrived, he’d actually been pretty nervous. At a Disciplinary Committee meeting, he’d brainstormed with Hanzawa about how to avoid intimidating his new roommate. They had agreed that to really get along, it wasn’t enough just to be extra nice at first; instead, they came up with practices Hirano would be able to maintain in the long run, like maybe using a nickname or just generally addressing his roommate casually.

Oh yeah! I used to call him by his whole last name all the time!

But it had been too long—troublesome to say—so he’d shortened it, and that was how he referred to Kagiura most of the time now.

He knew he'd have to make sure to wake Kagiura up in time for practice the next day. Still, something was bothering him, so before they put out the lights, Hirano said, "Hey, Kagi... I know how hard you're working, so I don't want to sound too critical or anything, but how are your grades doing? I haven't heard anything about how your proficiency tests came out."

Even as he spoke, he couldn't help privately chuckling at himself: *What am I, his personal tutor?*

Like most exams, the results of the tests that were given right after summer break were distributed to all students, showing where everyone ranked and the gaps between them. For first-years, it was mostly a point of reference. But given how much the tests covered, they were sometimes used in combination with a student's entrance exams to help determine which schools they should shoot for in the future.

"It was...close."

"How close?"

"My homeroom teacher said it wasn't bad enough to get summoned to the faculty office for a lecture, but that I'd better keep putting the work in."

"Ah..."

So not great, then.

Hirano had seen how hard Kagiura had worked, and almost wished he could reassure him on nothing more than the degree of his effort—Kagiura was practically dripping with disappointment. Still, he'd been unprepared, and there was no getting around it.

"Just make sure you really buckle down after the cultural fest, Kagi. If you miss out on some notes, make sure you ask someone to show you theirs by the next day. Don't let it build up, or you'll only get more and more confused every day."

Hirano tried to look strict, although in his heart he hoped he was just worrying too much. The beginning of anything was so important. He knew a lot of guys who had come in on athletic recommendations like Kagiura whose grades had really suffered when they got into their second year.

Hirano had never imagined he'd turn into such a worrywart the moment he became one of the upperclassmen responsible for his juniors.

"Sure...", Kagiura said. Then he added, "Hirano, would you tutor me again?"

"Yeah, sure. You can pay me back by getting good grades."

"I will! Uh... Can I ask you something?" The way he sort of shrank in on himself as he voiced the question was charming in the way only handsome guys could pull off.

"What's that?"

"Did your roommate tutor you when you were a first-year?"

"Hell no."

"Huh. Didn't you two get along?"

"We got along okay, but we weren't exactly close. I wasn't as approachable an underclassman as you are."

That was just how it usually was in the dorm. Hanzawa seemed a bit sensitive about homosexuality, and he was notorious for his ability to sniff out any guys who seemed to be getting *too* close and drop in on them at inopportune moments. Word had it his contempt for gay people wasn't completely arbitrary but had something to do with his family circumstances, so even Hirano pitied him for it.

"So you're saying I'm, like, superspecial?"

"What, you happy about it?" *Like a puppy?* Hirano teased, getting a big grin out of Kagiura.

"Sure. Y'know, I'm really glad I ended up as your roommate, Hirano."

Hirano couldn't help but smile at how good Kagiura was at being lovable. Against someone so affectionate, he would never win.



Was it really okay for every day to go so smoothly? As Kagiura and Niibashi stood at the shoe rack changing out of their outdoor shoes, he decided to open up to his friend. Niibashi was perceptive and intelligent enough that he seemed to be able to follow even the most out-of-context statement; it made him easy to talk to.

“Say you’ve got someone who wakes you up in the morning, eats all your least favorite foods for you, helps you study, is kind to you, and when they suddenly break into a smile, it takes your breath away. It would be hard *not* to like a person like that, right?” Kagiura asked, adding that this person even visited you on summer vacation.

Niibashi looked a little exasperated. “Kagiura! Are you mooning over your *girlfriend* first thing in the morning? This is an all-boys school—you know that kind of talk puts a target on your back!”

“This isn’t about my girlfriend!”

“Ahhh, I know what you mean,” Niibashi said with a bit of a grin, immediately picking up on what Kagiura was getting at. Kagiura meant Hirano, whom he was always going on about.

“Yeah. *Sigh*... I think I might *really* like him.” Indeed, the ability to say he might not “*really* like him” seemed to decline every day recently.

“You obviously do! And you’re still saying you only *might*?!”

“It’s still *might*!” When he had to say it out loud, he liked to feel that there was still room to pull the wool over his own eyes—even if it was mostly pretense.

“Well, that’s great and all, but we’ve got a committee meeting today, so get your head in the game.” Niibashi sighed, but Kagiura knew his friend really enjoyed the student council and committee meetings and looking after everything. He might act like it had been foisted on him, but he really took it seriously.

What was more, he was being considerate of Kagiura. *Just like Hirano*. Even though Hirano had his own studying to do, even though he was only a year

older, he was always sure to ask Kagiura if he was doing okay and reminded him to make sure he caught up on his studies once the cultural festival was over.

What Kagiura felt was too vague to be called true love; he was still at the point of *might*, but there was no question that he felt affection for Hirano. *Watching him, so dedicated and so cool, makes me realize I have to step up, too.*

It was a lot like basketball practice, where a failure to pay attention could get you hurt. They were in the home stretch on preparations for the cultural fest, and it could get distracting, but in order to get the most out of the experience, he had to see his responsibilities through to the end.

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks, Niibashi,” he said.

Preparations for the cultural festival were coming along nicely. So nicely, in fact, that although Kagiura had begged off basketball practice to go to a committee meeting, the meeting wrapped up in no time at all, and he found himself with some free time on his hands. Normally, he would have gone to join practice, even if he did have to jump in midway, but somehow he just wasn’t feeling like it today. Instead, he decided to head straight back to the dorm. It wasn’t even five o’clock.

I wonder if Hirano’s back yet, he thought as he knocked and opened the door. “I’m back,” he said.

Normally, he would have heard Hirano reply “Welcome back,” but this time there was no answer. Hirano was there, yes—but he was standing in the middle of the room, dressed in a woman’s yukata.

“Urk,” he said.

“Y-yukata...,” Kagiura said, staring openly. It looked fantastic on him. Even though it was technically a woman’s outfit.

“I was checking the fit,” Hirano said.

“You realize you’ve got the wrong side on top?” asked Kagiura. There was no way Hirano didn’t know the way he had it, right side on top, was only for dead people, but Kagiura felt obliged to make sure.

“I’m supposed to be a ghost,” Hirano snapped. That explained it.

“Ahhh, for your haunted house... So you’re going to be one of the jump scares, Hirano?”

“Yeah, I am... Oh, that reminds me. Don’t come to our haunted house.”

“Why not?”

It would have made sense if Hirano had insisted that he show up, but telling him *not* to come? That was unexpected, and Kagiura felt a little put out. Of course he wanted to see Hirano’s haunted house.

“I’m embarrassed to try to spook people I know.”

After a pause, Kagiura said, “Which ghost are you, Hirano?”

“I’ll tell you if you promise not to come.”

Kagiura couldn’t make that promise; he knew he couldn’t keep it. Finally, he said simply, “I do want to come.”

Hirano heaved a sigh and then, uncharacteristically, pulled the dividing curtain between their sides of the room and disappeared behind it. He was probably changing again. But even Kagiura could tell that his annoyance was just a cover for his embarrassment.





The cultural festival was just ten days away. The deadline to order materials or foodstuffs had come and gone, while the production of signboards and costumes had reached a fever pitch. Many students came in on Saturdays and Sundays at this point. Things just needed to be in a good place by the next day after class, or even the day after that, but if you had club or sports activities, the reality was that it was hard to find the time.

Many of the nonathletic clubs had stalls related to their activities, while the sports teams practiced long and hard all year round. Finding the time you needed amid it all was the epitome of the school's value on taking initiative. Or that was the nice way to put it; but one big driver behind this punishing schedule was that there would be talk if the committee members' grades all suddenly dropped.

Midterm exams weren't until next month, but that only meant there would be more material on them. Even Hirano could only sigh at the contrast with first term, when there had been two tests in quick succession. After all, the difficulty was up across the board compared with middle school, and teachers warned students that their degree of comprehension here would impact how they did on the national mock tests. Meanwhile, students were also urged to go to open-campus days and school festivals at educational institutions they hoped to attend.

Suffice to say, fall was a busy time, whether you were a first-or second-year.

"Hirano, they say another typhoon's coming in a couple of days," Kagiura said as he came in, looking uneasy. Recently, his mood had risen and fallen with the weather report.

After his initial panic about the frenzy of second term, Hirano thought Kagiura had achieved a certain detached dignity, but now he was acting like a kid again. He was on pins and needles as if every day was a field-trip day.

"Yeah, that happens this time of year," Hirano said.

"I wonder if it'll be sunny next week..." He sighed and gave a dry cough. Maybe his throat was bothering him, because he took a lozenge out of his

pocket and popped it in his mouth.

“Well, there’s always the backup day.”

“Was everything okay last year?”

Hirano thought he could hear the lozenge click off Kagiura’s teeth.

“Not sure. I guess if I don’t remember, that means it probably was.”

“The teacher said we wouldn’t have to stop if it sprinkled, but I think what he meant was we’d use the gym, and I just wasn’t sure if all the stalls would fit in there...”

“Ahhh, so that’s what they’re doing with the outdoor stuff. Sorry, I don’t know.”

“That’s okay. Thanks anyway.”

“By the way, have you decided who’s taking what shift during the festival? If I’m going to check it out, I figure I might as well do it while you’re behind the counter.”

“Yeah, we’ve got it all set... But if our schedules match up, I was hoping you and I could check out the festival together.”

“You sure you want to go with *me*?”

“Sorry for the short notice. It’s all right if you’ve already got plans with someone else.”

You don’t look like it’s all right, Hirano thought, observing the pout that immediately appeared on Kagiura’s face. Was this a sign of him giving up too quickly—or not quickly enough?

“Maybe in the morning, then,” he said. “The food-related places tend to get pretty busy around lunchtime, so I’d like to fill up early and get a sense of which events I want to check out. I’ll have a look around.”

“Sure!”

With that, Kagiura announced that he was going to do his homework by dinnertime and sat down at his desk; Hirano opened a book of practice problems so as not to disturb him. The only sounds were the scratching of their

mechanical pencils, paper, and the occasional small cough. A faint sound, dazing him, like when a rain shower passed outside.

Curious, Hirano focused and listened, and realized Kagiura seemed to be drinking more water than normal. Well, who could blame him? The weather was still hot enough to make you want to jump straight in a pool during the day, but the nights were getting colder and colder. Kagiura might have had stamina to spare, but between sweating during morning and evening practices and rushing all over for the Cultural Festival Committee, this couldn't have been an easy season for him.

Hirano knew guys like him didn't always pay attention to their own health. It was just a tickle in the throat now, but if he wasn't careful, it could become a full-blown cold.

It's always the ones who look the toughest, Hirano thought.



At last, the cultural festival started the next day.

Kagiura had mentally prepared to be at school for ages the night before the festival started, but under the student council's rules, absolutely no one was allowed to stay late that day. (The lack of mercy for those who couldn't finish the work within the stipulated time was the sort of thing one would only see at a school that prized individual autonomy as highly as this one.) Likewise, all club and sports activities were banned, in part to help police clandestine practices for the cultural fest. As such, Kagiura had nothing to do but fret.

He decided to study in his room as an alternative to simply pacing, but he struggled to focus on English vocabulary, and mathematical formulas seemed even more hopeless. Finally, he settled on reading a basketball magazine he subscribed to. That was what he was doing when Hirano said, "Hey, Kagi, you like cookies?"

His head snapped up. "I do!"

"Great. I've got some left over from cooking-class practice today. Want it?" Hirano handed the cookies to Kagiura, muttering that he'd almost forgotten about them.

It turned out to be more than just a little, round treat. It was a two-color cookie, the halves neatly separated. Practically worthy of a bakery. Fantastic. It looked delicious.

"I'll take it!" Kagiura exclaimed. Handmade snacks from a male student were rarer than home cooking. Kagiura himself had tried it only once, when his class had made a hard candy in grade school.

"Sure, have it. There was this other one that Sasaki made, in the shape of a cat's face. He did it to look like a black-and-white cat. It came out great. Wish I'd taken a picture."

"So you made this one, Hirano?"

"Yeah. Well, we all made the dough together."

"I think it came out really well."

“Huh? Oh, ha, thanks. Think of it as comfort food... Even if I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Wonder if I should eat it right now,” Kagiura mused. It would be dinner soon.

“Ahhh... Well, just between the two of us... I ate one, too.”

Hirano held a finger to his mouth in a hush-hush gesture. It caught Kagiura completely by surprise, and with the cookie already in his mouth, he coughed hard and started to choke.

“Hey, you all right?!”

Over the course of the last six months together, Kagiura had learned that Hirano was really soft underneath his appearance, but even so, this caught him off guard. “I th-think I inhaled some cookie,” he said.

“Huh?!”

He *might* really like this guy.

He still wasn’t outside the realm of *might*...he thought.

“I-it was so good I ate it a little too enthusiastically,” he said, trying to cover for himself and earning a gale of laughter from Hirano.

He’s really quick to burst out laughing!

“Ha-ha-ha! Yeah? That’s great, then. Ha-ha-ha!”

“Bah. You laugh too much, Hirano,” Kagiura said, and attempted to conceal his embarrassment by hiding behind his magazine.

Hirano apologized but was still chuckling. “Geez. If I ever get married, I hope I find someone who wears their heart on their sleeve like you do, Kagi.”

Time seemed to stop. Kagiura went stock-still and dropped the basketball magazine.

“Oh, hey, it’s dinnertime. Let’s get going,” Hirano said.

Does he not realize what he said? Kagiura thought. Even though it had almost knocked him over! He was so frozen with shock that he was late to dinner.

The long-awaited day of the cultural festival was bright and clear; indeed, almost hot. The school grounds were packed with people, creating a colorful display, for on this day of days students were allowed to wear casual clothing even at school.

Kagiura was wearing a T-shirt the class had designed: the word *yakitori* emblazoned on an orange shirt along with an image of a skewer. The simplicity of it was eye-catching.

Some of Kagiura's classmates had complained that they wouldn't know what to wear to school if they didn't have to stick to the student uniform. Kagiura had dismissed them, thinking it was hot enough that everyone would just be wearing T-shirts anyway, but come the day, he started to understand how they felt. Seeing all these different outfits where he normally saw only a sea of student uniforms somehow felt reckless and wild and left him antsy and excited. And if Kagiura, who was used to wearing casual clothes around the dorm at least, felt that way, how much stranger must it have been for the students who commuted from home?

A year ago at this time, Kagiura, whose school choices had been limited, was still struggling with where to go and what to do after middle school, and he hadn't attended this cultural festival, although the weather had been perfect for it. So now everything he saw seemed fresh and new, interesting and exciting even though he'd seen the other students getting everything ready.

Most of all, every bit of the food looked delicious.

When Kagiura, armed with a pamphlet about the festival, went to Hirano's class to find him, Hirano promptly emerged dressed in one of his favorite T-shirts over a simple white business shirt.

Hirano let Kagiura choose where they went ("It's my second year anyway"). They walked straight past someone holding a sign that read CHEESE YAKISOBA IN THE COURTYARD!! The yakisoba fried noodle guys were the yakitori stall's rivals, but Kagiura still planned to try it eventually.

The line for yakitori was good and long, longer than it had been during Kagiura's shift in the morning. When they got to the front of it, they were handed a cup of yakitori skewers, and then they set off exploring, Kagiura

practically dragging Hirano all the way.



Hirano multitasked on his lunch break, grabbing some food with Kagiura while they checked out the festival, but as soon as he got back, it was his turn in the haunted house. Now he was made up as Oiwa.

He was positioned near the exit, hiding behind a dummy made up to look like a post in an otherwise unremarkable hallway. It was an obvious place for someone to hide, but that was the point. Terrifying people by jumping out from somewhere *too* unexpected could cause them to tumble backward; instead, the students hoped people would appreciate the fine work they'd done on this otherwise expected monster.

That was the idea anyway, and Hirano looked so monstrous that if he'd popped up out of nowhere, it might have been genuinely dangerous.

They'd been letting people into the haunted house at two-minute intervals, and screams could be heard in two stages: first when Hirano jumped out and then when he slowly lifted up the wig covering his gruesome face. It was very satisfying.

There was a thumping of footsteps. Hirano could tell someone was running and decided not to burst out in front of them. He guessed it was probably someone trying to run away, too scared to even make a sound.

Indeed, a moment later someone else came along, jogging to catch up with the first person. "Hey, stop, Niibashi! No running!"

Hey, I know that voice.

Who should it be but Kagiura. Without quite meaning to, Hirano peeked out, to find Kagiura looking right at him. They both stopped.

"Aw, geez. C'mon, get out of here!" Hirano said. *And after I told him not to come!* He found himself somehow uneasy being seen with long hair and started to reach up to take off his wig. It was a little early yet for him to go on break, but having someone he was this close to see him in a woman's outfit...

To his disbelief, though, Kagiura slapped a hand down on the wig. "Hey, Hirano, that looks pretty good on y—" He started to part the hair—then caught a glimpse of the horrific makeup and screamed at the top of his lungs.

Tickled to see Kagiura playing what was usually *his* part, Hirano started laughing. What else could he do when a friend had seen him in such a humiliating situation? He began to shamble toward Kagiura. *I'll give you a good, close look!*

Kagiura had gotten over his shock and was laughing, too, and now he shouted again and charged at Hirano.

Already on the edge of his balance in the yukata and tall geta sandals, there was nothing Hirano could do—he crashed to the floor, Kagiura and all.

Kagiura landed on top of him right in the middle of the hallway of the haunted house. The next customers, who had caught up to Kagiura, screamed when they saw them tangled up together on the floor. “Whoa... Ack!”

Startled, Hirano and Kagiura scrambled to their feet. The customers who found them were a couple of young women. The one in front cried out and grabbed her friend’s hand, dragging her back around the last corner. “W-w-we’re so sorry! We didn’t see anything!” she cried.

“What’s going on?” asked the other, still not sure what had happened.

“N-n-nothing! Nothing’s going on!”

She’d sure screamed pretty loud for “nothing,” but who could blame her? She’d found a monster pushed down on the ground by another customer.



Hirano straightened his yukata and put his wig back on. "Sorry, Kagi, I took it too far there. Go catch up with your friend."

"Sure, no problem."

"And, uh, sorry you had to see that," he said to the two accidental witnesses.

"Don't apologize! It was a feast for my eyes!" one of them called back. Whatever that was supposed to mean. Maybe she meant because Kagiura was so handsome.

"Sorry. Guess I sort of killed the haunted-house mood." Hirano rifled through Sasaki's bag, which was sitting nearby, and helped himself to a couple of the candies inside, offering them to the two young ladies. "I hope you'll take this candy with my apologies." His makeup had been ruined when his wig came off, and he was trying to keep that side of his face hidden. He couldn't help the sense that handing out candy while looking like that was horrific enough, but it wasn't nice to scare people while you were trying to apologize.

"Eep! I mean, sure." The girl who'd cried out earlier still sounded a bit out of sorts.

No sooner had Sasaki (aka Hanako) opened his bag after they got off their shift than he noticed something was wrong. "I sense I have fewer candies in here," he said.

"I gave a couple to some customers."

"And why would you do that?"

Sasaki seemed awfully suspicious, considering he was always sharing his candies, but Hirano wasn't sure exactly how much to tell him. He decided to give him the short version: "A bribe to shut them up." He didn't feel like talking about another guy falling on top of him.

"That sounds awfully shady..."

"Huh? No, it's all aboveboard. That reminds me, give me another one. I'll pay you for it."

"Ahhh, just take one. Anything but the milk flavor."

“No, I’ll definitely pay you for this one. This one’s for me personally.”

Sasaki responded to Hirano’s insistence with an odd look. Suspicious, like there was something on his mind. “Is it just me, or are you acting a little funny, Hirano?” It felt distinctly weird to have a guy in makeup, grinning nonstop, say you seemed “a little funny.”

“What? Why would you say that?” Hirano said.

“It’s like you’re even better at looking after others than before.”

Hirano realized that at this rate he was headed straight for a ribbing. “Dunno what you’re talking about.” He pointedly looked away and started digging in his wallet. There, some change. He held the coins out to Sasaki in exchange for the candy. There was plenty of it still in his bag.

If Hirano was, as Sasaki said, getting better at looking after others, it was probably because of Kagiura. Living with him had taught Hirano that even when he was really worried about the guy, just telling him what to do didn’t have any effect. Plus, he’d learned about joy—and about gratitude.

He’d started to think lately that the reason his parents could communicate so naturally and easily was because they’d been doing it since before he was born, sharing with each other and valuing each other. He should communicate those same things to his friends.

“Oh yeah. You remember that thing before summer break?” Hirano was still a little bashful about it, but he decided he could tell Sasaki now and decided to forge ahead.

“Hmm?”

“The thing behind the dorm. You all healed up?”

All but obsessed with finding the culprit and wrapping the matter up before summer break started, Hirano had completely forgotten to say what he was supposed to say to Sasaki.

“What, that old thing? That’s been better for ages.”

“Oh yeah? Well, thanks for helping out that underclassman.”

Hirano was trying to sound casual, but Sasaki was openly amazed. “Never

thought I'd hear something like that out of you, Hirano. Shock of the century!"

"Aw, shaddup."



EPILOGUE

GOOD THINGS.



Cleaning up after the cultural festival went much faster than setup had. It stung to have to break down what they had worked so hard to build, but the sorrow of taking it apart was, in its own way, part of the experience.

That, anyway, was what Kagiura figured he might have been thinking if he'd had a bit more life experience to guide him.

Ever since he'd joined the festival committee, things had been a blur as they got ready for the event. He tried to take charge of the breakdown to make up for having stuck Niibashi with most of the paperwork, and his dedication left him with a sore back.

Ultimately, he returned to the dorm about the usual time, where he discovered that the Osmanthus in the hedges were blooming. Now, when had that happened?

"Yo, welcome back."

"Yeah, I'm here. You're back early, Hirano."

"Yep! Just making myself at home."

The haunted house had been such a large project that Kagiura had assumed it would take a long time to disassemble, but it looked like things had gone smoothly—and quickly.

"Need anything?"

"Mm." Hirano didn't really answer but handed him something.

Kagiura blinked at it. "What's this? Candy?"

"Sorry you didn't get a chance for a good scare at the haunted house."

Is that what was on his mind?

Not only had he knocked Hirano over, but students from another school had seen them! Forget about being scared—Kagiura would have frozen either way. Hirano didn't seem particularly bothered.

"I thought it was plenty scary—that makeup of yours," Kagiura said, not sure how to feel.

"Yeah, I saw that had you going. The whole thing wasn't very haunted house-y, though. Anyway, think of that as my apology. Your throat's been bugging you, right?"

Kagiura didn't say anything right away but was struck by Hirano's offer. *He treats me with so much kindness.*

"Oops, don't you like candy? Wait, but I saw you eating those molasses candies the other day."

"I like it," Kagiura said, feeling a rush of heat in his chest, something far beyond the average warm glow. Yes, he did like candy, but what really made him happy was knowing Hirano was thinking of him.

"Cool. That's great."

"I really like it..."

How many times would he have to say it before his true meaning, his true feelings, got across?

"Sure." Hirano smiled bashfully, and the expression almost blinded Kagiura.

He couldn't find another word to say.

They headed to dinner together a little earlier than usual. They were sitting and eating when someone pulled out the chair next to Hirano. He had an idea of who it was—there weren't a lot of other students in the dorm who felt comfortable casually approaching him. It turned out to be Hanzawa, the dorm leader. Kagiura didn't see much of him; what with basketball practice, he tended to eat later than Hanzawa.

"Where's your roommate?" Hirano asked offhandedly, and the word sent a thrill through Kagiura. *Do they use the same word for me?* he wondered. It sounded so easy, so intimate.

“Asleep. Had a bit too much fun at the cultural fest, and now he doesn’t want to get up, so I left him there.” Hanzawa sounded pretty tired himself. Kagiura felt like he was overhearing someone’s secret, and it made him a little uncomfortable. When he finished eating his salad, he busily involved himself in his stir-fry, but soon he froze with his chopsticks in midair.

There’s so many green peppers...

Hanzawa, ever alert to small things, noticed him. “Aren’t you going to eat that?” he asked. Curse him.

At almost the same moment, though, Hirano said, “Just one.” He was so thoughtful.

“Right...” Just one. Kagiura could do that. He swallowed a pepper, and Hirano grinned.

“Nice work.”

“Thanks, it feels like it. But I’m not sure I can do another one...”

“You’re hopeless!”

Hanzawa watched this friendly exchange wide-eyed, but there was nowhere for him to get a word in. Hirano, usually a stickler for table manners, simply reached over and started picking peppers off Kagiura’s plate with his chopsticks, smiling the whole time. When he had eaten all of them, Kagiura exclaimed, “Thank you, Hirano!”

That was when Hanzawa finally found his voice. “There’s nothing...*happening* between you two, is there?” he asked Hirano, sounding profoundly uncomfortable.

“Happening? Don’t know what you mean. This is what a great friendship looks like. Right, Kagi?”

“A great friendship... I guess you could call it that...” Transfixed by Hirano’s easy smile, Kagiura found he could hardly nod his agreement, and it made his reaction seem insincere.

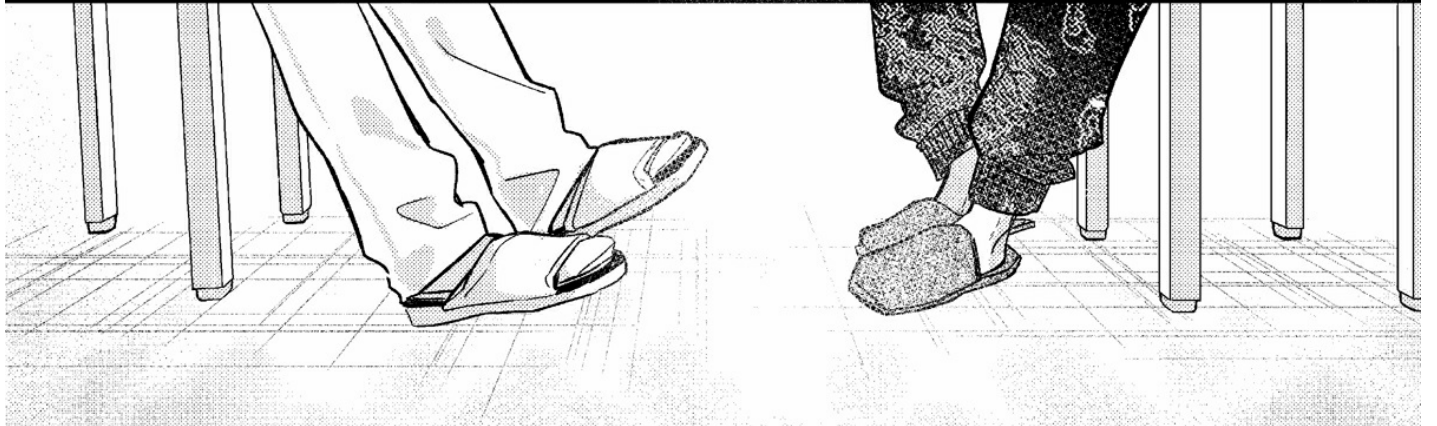
“You guess? Am I wrong?”

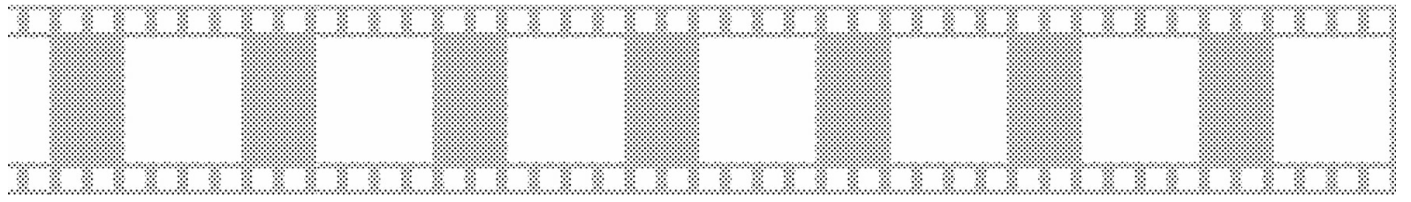
Hirano looked completely at ease, while Kagiura seemed to be trying to

process what was going on. Hanzawa studied them both. He murmured, “Could it be...?” But then he shook his head as if to dismiss his own question.

Kagiura, meanwhile, felt a grin come over his face, a grin of complete agreement with Hirano. Hirano had called them friends. Had called Kagiura a great friend of his.

A joyful glow spread through him, and when he spoke, he had never sounded so happy. He knew he must have the biggest smile on his face. “Hirano, I’m so glad I met you!”





Special Thanks!

Kotoko Hachijo

You've written such a wonderful novel. I love it.

Editor—Sakurazawa

Without you, the original idea might never have gotten done. You always tried to take the author's opinion into account as much as possible. Sorry I was always so last-minute with things... The number of red corrections was truly staggering...

Gene Editorial Division—Y

You were the editor who introduced me to Hachijo and came up with the entire idea for this spin-off. (I love My Fave Character Shines Brightest in the World: Confessions of a 2.5-Dimensional Fanboy, which you work on.) Everyone in the Gene Editorial Department You're all wonderful. Thank you so much for letting me put out collected volumes. And I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused...

My assistants

Yuki, you always step up for my last-minute screentone needs even though you've got work to do, a child to raise, and a life to live. You're so kind to me. Tsubaki Kuroaya, you're the power behind me. My comrade in arms since the day I graduated. Having a pro backing you up is too awesome. You're so kind to me. Get some sleep.

Designer—Aya Sekine (Kawatani Design) You made an author's head-in-the-clouds dreams ("I want the cover to look like a wedding invitation... And also a scrapbook...") come true. Thank you for making the cover so sweet and inspiring.

Everyone at RUHIA Ltd.

Thank you for doing the typesetting and for accommodating so many changes right up to the deadline!

Daisuke Shinseki (RUHIA Ltd.) Thank you for doing the proofreading. I was so excited going over the proofread versions, seeing how changing a single word could make an entire sentence hit so much harder.

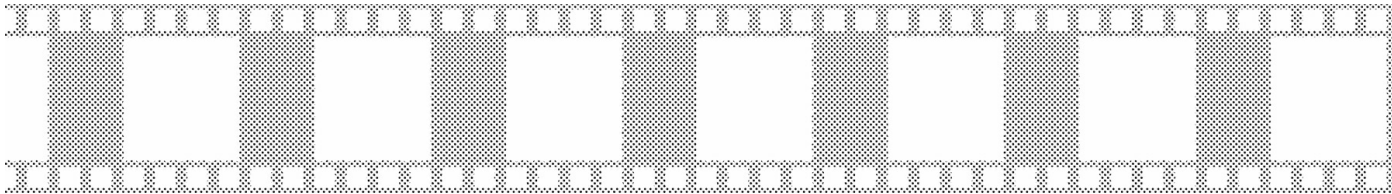
Everyone in Sales

I owe so much to POP and Planning... And I'm sure I'll owe you more in the future.

Thank you to the printers, the publishing agency, all the bookstores, everyone in the distribution network... All of you who helped get this work to so many eager readers!

And finally, to everyone who supported the original comic on Twitter and Pixiv and to everyone who picked up this novel...

Thank you so much!



Afterword.

Hello! It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Kotoko Hachijo. It's been an honor and a pleasure to work on this spin-off novel featuring Hirano and Kagiura.

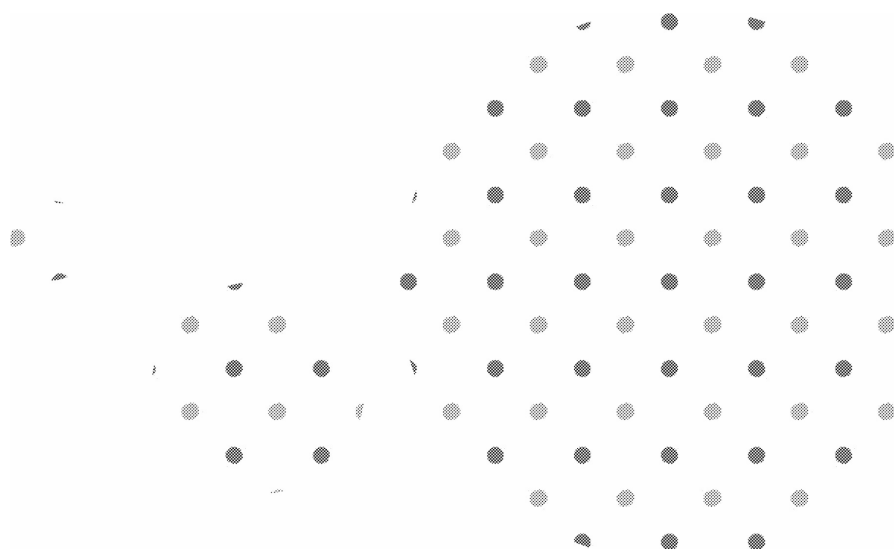
These two young men have only gotten more popular as the volumes pile up, so I have to confess I was a bit nervous being tasked with showing their daily lives, but they're such lovely characters that writing them was a pleasure. Harusono came up with some original ideas, then kept an eye on things as I fleshed out the details, so I was able to write something that felt of a piece with the world of Sasaki and Miyano and was able to bring the characters ever closer to what Harusono imagined... At least, that's my hope.

Some of the episodes are inspired by my own thoughts about what might happen to the characters or the kinds of conversations they might have. I'm sorry to see my time with Hirano and Kagi coming to an end, but I'm excited for this book to make its way into readers' hands.

Thank you all very much.

This book only exists because of the work of a great many people, but I'm particularly indebted to Harusono; our editor, Sakurazawa; and Y in Gene's Editorial Department. My thanks go out to everyone involved.

Kotoko Hachijo



Afterword.

Pleased to meet you! And thank you so much for picking up Hirano and Kagiura. I'm Shou Harusono, creator of the manga and responsible for the idea for this book. If you're here from the manga version, it's great to see you again, and thank you.

We've received a novel that does a really wonderful job with these characters.

Hirano and his friends were originally part of a bonus short I did for the Sasaki and Miyano manga, but there were so many requests and so many fond wishes that finally, with the help of many people, I turned their story into a novel. A whole book devoted exclusively to Hirano and Kagiura. Thank you all very much.

Hirano and Kagiura was originally a story I did online, and in my mind, it was largely complete. But working on this book, taking a fresh look at the characters and their whole situation, made me realize how much more of these characters I want to draw. I would love to get a chance to return to them sometime.

There were so many moments I wanted to draw in the novel that it made the illustrations difficult! I would say to myself, "I want to draw this scene...but I want to draw the reaction to it, too!" There were so many moments like that, and it led to a bunch of the illustrations being broken up into panels. It was a lot of fun, though.

Hachijo, who handled the writing of the novel, has such a gift for psychological description. The way feelings of love creep up on Kagi all unawares, the way the happiness springs on him, come through so clearly. Then there's the way Hirano smiles or the moment when Kagi is talking to Hirano about his struggles on the basketball team and the anxiety he feels—I just love all of it. I devoured the draft pages every time they arrived. Thank you, Hachijo. I'm so thrilled to have had you write these characters.

If you'd like to share your thoughts or feedback, please feel free to get in touch via your favorite medium:

To: Kotoko Hachijo and/or Shou Harusono

Attn: Gene Pixiv Editorial Department

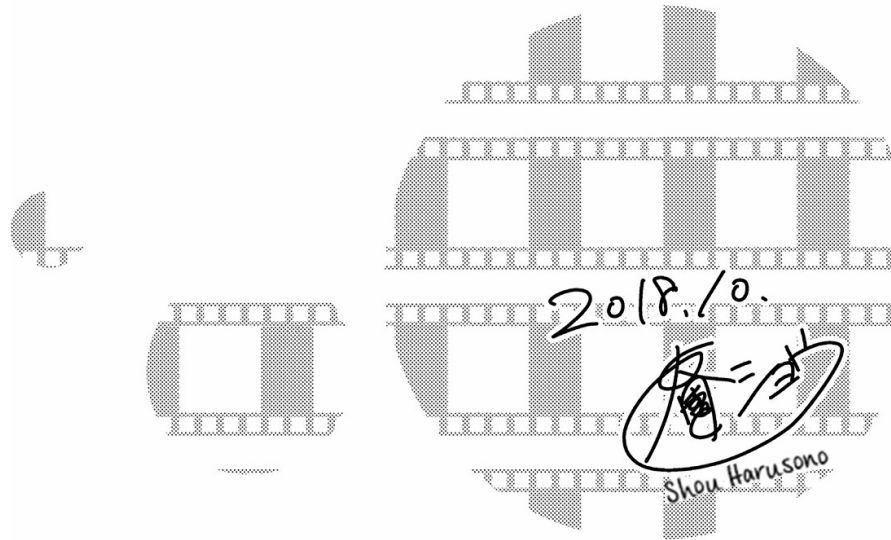
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I'm happy to say there's so much more I still want to write, and I'll be trying to polish and improve the work the very best I can. I hope I'll see you next time!

Later!

(BTW, please also have a look at the Sasaki and Miyano manga. It's all about Miyano, an underclassman on the Disciplinary Committee with Hirano and Sasaki.)



And now it's time for the
bonus manga! Flip to the
back of the book, read right
to left, and enjoy!

HEADING TO A LATE
BREAKFAST ON A DAY OFF

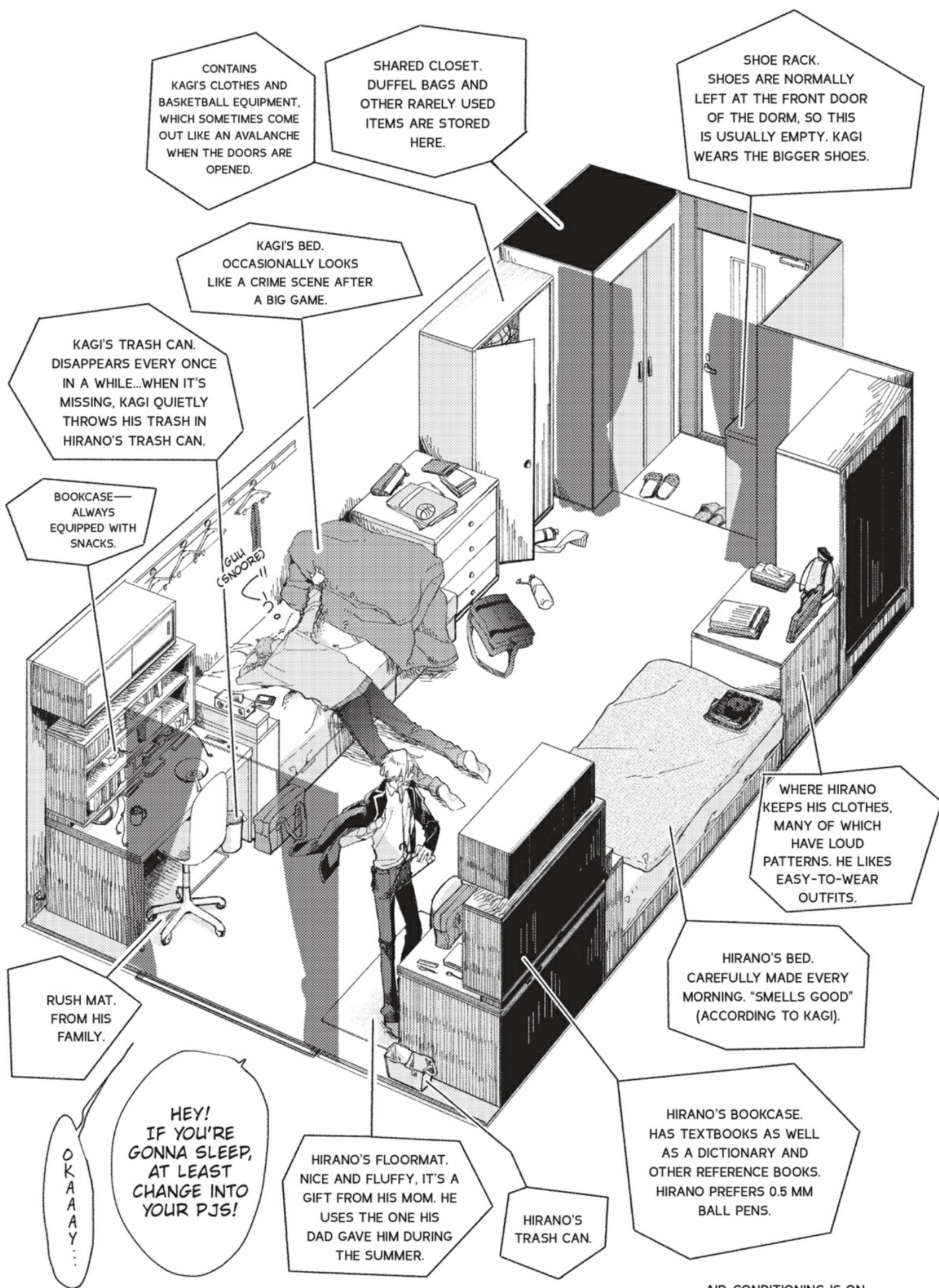
HIRANO-SAN & KAGI-KUN

UUURGH...

YAWN...

GYUUU
PINCHD





CONTAINS
KAGI'S CLOTHES AND
BASKETBALL EQUIPMENT,
WHICH SOMETIMES COME
OUT LIKE AN AVALANCHE
WHEN THE DOORS ARE
OPENED.

SHARED CLOSET.
DUFFEL BAGS AND
OTHER RARELY USED
ITEMS ARE STORED
HERE.

SHOE RACK.
SHOES ARE NORMALLY
LEFT AT THE FRONT DOOR
OF THE DORM, SO THIS
IS USUALLY EMPTY. KAGI
WEARS THE BIGGER SHOES.

KAGI'S BED.
OCCASIONALLY LOOKS
LIKE A CRIME SCENE AFTER
A BIG GAME.

KAGI'S TRASH CAN.
DISAPPEARS EVERY ONCE
IN A WHILE...WHEN IT'S
MISSING, KAGI QUIETLY
THROWS HIS TRASH IN
HIRANO'S TRASH CAN.

BOOKCASE—
ALWAYS
EQUIPPED WITH
SNACKS.

WHERE HIRANO
KEEPS HIS CLOTHES,
MANY OF WHICH
HAVE LOUD
PATTERNS. HE LIKES
EASY-TO-WEAR
OUTFITS.

HIRANO'S BED.
CAREFULLY MADE EVERY
MORNING. "SMELLS GOOD"
(ACCORDING TO KAGI).

HIRANO'S BOOKCASE.
HAS TEXTBOOKS AS WELL
AS A DICTIONARY AND
OTHER REFERENCE BOOKS.
HIRANO PREFERS 0.5 MM
BALL PENS.

HIRANO'S
TRASH CAN.

HIRANO'S FLOORMAT.
NICE AND FLUFFY, IT'S A
GIFT FROM HIS MOM. HE
USES THE ONE HIS
DAD GAVE HIM DURING
THE SUMMER.

RUSH MAT.
FROM HIS
FAMILY.

HEY!
IF YOU'RE
GONNA SLEEP,
AT LEAST
CHANGE INTO
YOUR PJS!

O
K
A
A
Y
...

AIR-CONDITIONING IS ON.



END









WANNA
TRY A BITE
OF MINE
TOO?
I GOT
TARE
SAUCE!

HIRANO-SAN,
YOU GOT
THE SALTED
YAKITORI?



SURE. LET'S
TRADE—STICK
FOR A STICK.



LOOK! IT
SAYS YOU
CAN TRY
BALLOON
ART OVER
THERE!

HIRANO-
SAN, LET'S
GO!

OKAY.



OH,
NOTHING.

SUP?

HEY!

?

YEAH,
SURE
...

SIGN: DRAMA CLUB, ROMEO AND JULIET

BONUS

SOME QUALITY TIME
TOGETHER.





Hirano and Kagiura

ORIGINAL STORY & ART: Shou Harusono

NOVELIZATION: Kotoko Hachijo

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